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The American Dream in Selected Works by Three Chinese American Women Writers: From Dreams to Nightmares

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THE AMERICAN DREAM

IN SELECTED WORKS BY THREE CHINESE AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS:

FROM DREAMS TO NIGHTMARES

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In this dissertation, I examine selected works by three Chinese American women writers: Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* (1977), Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* (1993) and Gish Jen's *Typical American* (1991). These texts present the American Dream as an important theme. I explore the American Dream as experienced by the Chinese in America and demonstrate how their dreams turn into nightmares. I address how social forces of race and class intertwine with gender in hegemonic formations. These intertwining forces mediated through Chinese exclusionary laws have racialized and feminized Chinese men and subjugated Chinese women. I argue that, portraying the Chinese American characters as resistant via strategies of survival against their fate of being Asian and being poor, the authors have challenged the Oriental stereotypes of the Chinese as being the inferior, passive, silent, and victimized Other. In doing so, they have reconstructed Chinese American identities against those stereotypes. In the discussion of the selected texts, I also argue that the authors appeal to their transnational consciousness. With such consciousness, they share a strong desire to claim their right to be American. Meanwhile, they show a renewed interest in their Asian legacy. Via the politics of differences, they are forging connections between Asia and Asian America. It is

important that the Chinese in America be aware of their “in-between” space so as to survive and succeed in their struggle for the American Dream.

This dissertation contains five chapters. Chapter I examines the American Dream concept, states the thesis, justifies the need for the study, and explains theoretical approaches. The middle three chapters are a study of the selected texts. I discuss the American Dream of the Chinese in America from the perspectives of race, class, and gender. Addressing their dreams and nightmares, I argue that the American Dream does not provide them with equal opportunities although they have contributed remarkably to building America. Chapter V concludes that negotiating ethnic and cultural differences for mutual understanding and respect, the authors convey that people should be treated equally regardless of their race, gender, class, and national origin.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: THE GOLD MOUNTAIN DREAMS

The Dream Concept

In *The Declaration of Independence*, the founding fathers of America "hold certain truths to be self evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." This sentiment, I believe, is the foundation of the American Dream, even though the ideal has rarely realized in history. The term "American Dream" was first used in *The Epic of America* (1931) by historian James Truslow Adams. He defines it as "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement" (404). In David Madden's edited book, *American Dreams, American Nightmares* (1970), Robert Heilman indicates in his article, "The Dream Metaphor: Some Ramifications," that "Dreams about America are an import from Europe, where they were an old habit dating from the Renaissance" (7). In American history, Heilman observes, "the dream in action has repeatedly been emigration: from Europe to America, from society-at-large to utopian communities, and from the east coast to various receding wests" (10). In the same book, Maxwell Geismar states that the American Dream "has been our ruling myth, as a culture, and in the literature which both reveals and helps to shape our culture" (45).

In *The American: the Making of a New Man* (1943), however, Adams argues that

"the American Dream turned for a while into a nightmare of human misery" (144). Writers in Madden's book also articulate the American Dream gone wrong in their writing. Geismar, for example, illustrates that the first great flowering of New England Transcendentalism, which, in such pure voices as those of Emerson and Thoreau, expressed the American Dream at its purest, lyrical prime. Their American Dream, however, was followed directly by the crushing and bloody epoch of the Civil War. In literature, as another example, Theodore Dreiser, "the world-famous figure — whose career has best epitomized all the glowing features of the American Dream — ended up as the historian of its demise and as the author of dark and nightmarish parables" (46, 48-49). Heilman explains, "People have dreams that cannot be fulfilled because things are the way they are; or dreams are fulfilled, and the dreamers remain unfulfilled; or people rely on dreams that ought not to be fulfilled because they are unfulfilling" (11). Madden notes in the introduction to his book (1979) that "Dreams, ideals, visions, myths, legends are now easily exposed as nightmares, frauds in disguise" (xxviii).

The American Dream has been attractive to Chinese immigrants just as it has been to any other immigrant population. Like the dreams of most other immigrants that have failed, the American Dream as experienced by the Chinese in America goes wrong for countless reasons. The selected texts by Chinese American women writers demonstrate that Chinese immigrants/Americans hold the American Dream of getting rich. For them, America is "The Beautiful Nation" (美国), as the Chinese translation of its name "America" means. It is "a peaceful country, a free country," the "Gold

Mountain" where they can "pick up the free gold" (*China Men* 40, 42). Their Gold Mountain, according to Shirley Geok-lin Lim, however, "turned into a labor camp for Chinese immigrants, and the experience of hard physical labor, low pay, long hours, and degrading conditions" ("Assaying the Gold" 147). Hundreds of thousands of Asian immigrants worked in mining and railroad construction in the mid-nineteenth century and in garment districts, restaurants, and other segregated professions from the late nineteenth to the twentieth centuries. Employed as cheap laborers and deprived of their right of equal treatment and pay, the Chinese suffered in their struggle to achieve the American Dream because of hostile political, social, and economic conditions.

Thesis Statement

In this study, I examine selected literary works by three Chinese American women writers: Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* (1977), Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* (1993) and Gish Jen's *Typical American* (1991). These texts present the American Dream as an important theme. I explore how the dreams of the Chinese are presented and why their dreams turn into nightmares. I address how social forces of race and class intertwine with gender in hegemonic formations. These intertwining forces mediated through such state apparatuses as the Chinese exclusionary laws have racialized and feminized Chinese men and subjugated Chinese women. I argue that, portraying the Chinese characters as resistant via strategies of survival against their fate of being Asian and being poor, the authors have challenged the Oriental stereotypes of the Chinese as being the inferior, passive, silent, and victimized Other. In doing so,

they have reconstructed Chinese American identities against those stereotypes. In the discussion of the selected texts, I also argue that the authors appeal to their transnational consciousness. With such consciousness, they share a strong desire to claim their right to be American. Meanwhile, they show a renewed interest in their Asian legacy. Via the politics of differences, they are forging connections between Asia and Asian America. It is important that the Chinese in America be aware of their "in-between" space (Bhabha 1) so as to survive and succeed in their struggle for the American Dream.

In the discussion of the American Dream as experienced by the Chinese in America, the term "transnational consciousness" is very important. The concept can be understood in two primary ways. First, as Chinese immigrants are from a different cultural tradition, they straddle cultures with a strong sense of diversity and difference because cultures collide violently between the capitalist-based values of the U.S. and complex Chinese cultural values derived from the Chinese and Chinese American tradition. Also, within the Chinese American literary and critical circles, there has long been a debate between the strategies of Cultural Nationalism proposed by Frank Chin and *The Aiiieeeee*! editors, with their strong masculinist overtones, and varieties of different strategies employed by such women writers as Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan that advance feminist values. As Homi Bhabha argues, "The borderline engagements of cultural difference may as often be consensual as conflictual; they may confound our definitions of tradition and modernity" (2). As a result, cultural conflicts are so complicated and tough that they are never easily resolved. Second, the authors of the selected texts appeal to transnational consciousness in the sense of negotiating

differences. They realize that the binary opposition between colonizing/colonized, Self/Other, etc. no longer accounts for what is going on today. Instead, they find themselves "in moments of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion" (Bhabha 1). Bhabha proposes an "in-between space" and "double vision," suggesting that the "interstitial passage between fixed indentifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (3, 5, 4). Indeed, as the selected texts demonstrate, the appropriation of one culture into the every day life of the hybrid culture is a political, social, and aesthetic strategy. The authors' middle ground position and strategy for survival and success are expressive of Edward Said's integrative view of human community and human liberation against a "separatist nationalism" (*Culture and Imperialism* 217).

Need for the Study

I chose to study the selected texts for the following reasons. First, the three texts present the American Dream as an important theme. Examination of the American Dream is necessary because, as an important mythic issue in all other literatures, it has become the myth of Chinese Immigrants. However, in Chinese American studies, there is not much literature about this issue. In fact, most of the studies are about the search for cultural, ethnic, gender or national identities, about mother-daughter relationships, about the topics of speech and silence and about

visibility and invisibility of Chinese American history. Specifically, critics have paid more attention to the more popular works such as Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club* than to other texts. While scant attention has been paid to the American Dream as a theme in Chinese American literature, there are, however, a couple of studies that deal with this theme. One study is entitled "Gold Mountain: Chinese Versions of the American Dream in Lin Yutang, Louis Chu, and Maxine H. Kingston" (1982) by Cheng Lok Chua. Chua argues that "Kingston is hauntingly aware that her ancestors came to America to seek wealth. But her books proclaim that the ancestral dream has given place to a concern that is much more in the mainstream of contemporary American intellectual life — the quest for identity" (46). In another study, Kate Liu argues that *China Men* "hybridizes U.S.A. national identity: it seeks to integrate into white American society the once excluded Chinese immigrants" (1). "Assimilation" is a key word even though Liu argues that it "does not mean becoming similar culturally but belonging in the nation as a big 'family'" (10). The Chinese American Dream, to Chua and Liu, becomes "the quest for identity" (Chua 46) and "belonging in the nation" (Liu 10).

While I agree on many points with them, especially with Liu that American national identity should include the once excluded Chinese, I argue that Hong Kingston's dreams go beyond the quest for personal or national identities. Claiming America, Kingston has placed higher goals in her American Dream: the desire for world peace in the current world of wars. To achieve her lofty goal, Kingston proposes forging connections between cultures, races, and nations while presenting her resistance

themes. In her 2005 study of *Typical American*, Phillipa Kafka discusses the attractions as well as the pitfalls of the American Dream awaiting Asian immigrants who betray their traditional values in order to succeed. Kafka suggests a non-binary recombinant modification of both Asian and American success mythologies which is not a repudiation of either culture, but an ongoing, endless cycle of flow in both directions ("Cheap, On Sale, American Dream" 105). This idea of mutual respect is important to understand for the Chinese to survive and succeed in their struggle against oppressive political and social forces. It is, therefore, important for my discussion of the American Dream in Chinese American literature.

The second reason why I study these texts is that they are about Chinese American families so that I can study the dreams and nightmares of families. This is necessary because I can address the history of both men and women and expose how hegemonic formations of race, class, and gender affect the lives of Chinese families, specifically how such formations affect husband-wife, parent-children, and sibling relationships. To do so, I will investigate how family, as a social definition of kinship and private bonds, is lived and redefined as an open negotiation of, and often resistance against, patriarchal and sexist forms of family and reveal that family is an important site in their struggle for the American Dream. Timothy Fong notices that "relatively little research has been done on Asian American families" (239). One important reason is that wives were not allowed to join their husbands before the United States Congress enacted a law in 1943 and again in 1946 allowing the wives and children of Chinese Americans to apply for entry as "non-quota immigrants" (*China Men* 157). Also, most

of the studies on contemporary Chinese American families are about women. As I have mentioned, critics have paid more attention to women's stories in Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Tan's *Joy Luck Club*. The few existing studies on Chinese American men, according to Sylvia Yanagisako, "often concentrate on the working class 'sojourner' or 'bachelor society' period of Chinese American history" (qtd. in Ho 196). In her chapter, "The Heart Never Travels: Fathers in the Mother-Daughter Stories of Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, and Fae Myenne Ng," Wendy Ho argues that it is crucial to tell the stories of Asian American Men and Women "when single and married men were adjusting to the presence of, and reunification with, Chinese women, children, and their extended kin immigrating in greater numbers to the United States and establishing new and more permanent communities in Chinatown" (196). Examining the dreams and nightmares of the Chinese American family, I will pay attention to the struggle of both men and women against racism, classism, patriarchy, and sexism. I will illustrate how such multiple oppressions affect Chinese American family life, i.e. how they cause dilemmas and tensions between family members. While all three texts portray the lives of Chinese American families in the mid- to late twentieth century, *China Men* includes the stories of grandfathers from the second half of the nineteenth century. I include *China Men* because, as a historical study, I can give a fuller picture by studying the lives of both "single husbands" and "married men" in Chinese American history.

The third reason why I study these texts is that I can analyze the problems of the Chinese American Dream from the point of view of social class along with racial and

gender oppressions. Although "the literature itself offers many examples of capitalist exploitation, class privilege, and penury, as well as of the interplay between class and ethnicity," as King-kok Cheung notices in 1997, "class issues have perhaps been the most neglected to date" ("Re-Viewing Asian American Literary Studies" 13). About ten years after Cheung's study, Lim, et al. confirm in their *Transnational Asian American Literature* (2006) that, besides gay and lesbian themes, "[c]ritical examinations of representations of class in Asian American writing have also been largely absent" (14). True, in Chinese American studies, much more research has been done on race and gender issues than on class. There are, however, a couple of studies that call for or engage in class analysis. For example, in his article, "Asian American Studies Needs Class Analysis," Peter Kwong points out that "While few works in Asian American literature focus primarily on class, class formation within the Asian American community is very much a reality" (77). Kwong, however, has not included literary texts to exemplify his arguments. Julia Lisella's critical essay, "Class, Ethnicity and Gender in Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*," engages in issues of class, race, and gender. Insisting that "*China Men* is a book about work and class," Lisella compares the text with Carlos Bulosan's *America is in the Heart*, arguing that "Kingston's vision is far less orthodox" and that "her critique of the capitalist system, which fosters racist attitudes and economic hardship on its workers are as clear and sharp as Bulosan's" (55, 56). As a result, while suggesting that "Kingston widens the concerns of […] Bulosan's proletariat realism by her insistence on placing gender at the center of her investigations of racial and class constructions of identity" (56), Lisella argues that "it

might be more useful to look at Kingston's work beside that of […] Filipino writer Carlos Bulosan" (55). She explores "the ways in which Kingston is a political writer, a writer at work on investigating class, race, and gender through a feminist lens" (56). Such a vision and exploration are helpful for my study of *China Men.*

Yungsuk Chae did a class analysis of Ng's *Bone*, arguing that *Bone* questions the social and economic mechanisms and restrictive legal policies practiced against Asian immigrants in the United States. Chae indicates that large numbers of Asian immigrants are still struggling with poverty and that the problem of poverty of these immigrants has been underrepresented in the context of Asian immigrants' perceived "success" (66). Like Lisa Lowe, Chae puts emphasis on the fact that the migration of labor from Asian or other countries was, in effect, a structural consequence of U.S. global expansion and U.S. capitalism (Chae 64, Lowe, "Immigration, Citizenship, Racialization" 10, 14). I base my study of class, race, and gender issues in regard to the Chinese American Dream on Lowe's and Chae's political insights and contribute to the study of selected texts from such perspectives, addressing the lack of class analysis.

Beyond these important reasons, one fundamental reason why I study these texts is that the authors' presentations of the American Dream are fictionalized through historical facts. That is, they base the stories of the Chinese in America on historical facts. Chinese emigration to the United States started in the mid-nineteenth century. Between the late 1840s and early 1880s, according to Sucheng Chan, customs officials recorded approximately 370,000 Chinese arrivals in Hawaii and California (3). Early Chinese immigrants left their homelands to escape political and economic turmoil at the

time. They wanted to make a better living in the United States. They invented the name “Gold Mountain” for America, more specifically, for the American West, where they arrived, expecting to achieve their dream of materialistic success during the period known as the Gold Rush. Today, the Chinese still call San Francisco (旧金山) — the Old Gold Mountain. In America at that time, labor was in short supply and “throughout the period from 1850 to World War II, the recruitment of Asian immigrant labor was motivated by the imperative to bring cheaper labor into the still developing capitalist economy” (Lowe, “Immigration, Citizenship, Racialization” 12). Although a small number of Chinese contract laborers set foot in Hawaii, Chan notes that a lot more “passed through the San Francisco Customs House en route to the gold fields in the Sierra Nevada foothills” (28). As gold ran out, Fong states, “thousands of Chinese were recruited in the mid-1860s to work on the transcontinental railroad” (18). Little has been recorded in American history by white historians about the Chinese building the railroads in spite of the fact that the most difficult and dangerous sections of the railroads were built by the Chinese. Countless workers perished during the railroad construction when they had to chisel tunnels through the granite using explosives. Snow slides and avalanches also cost lives. Eventually, as Iris Chang notes, more than one thousand Chinese railroad workers died, and twenty thousand pounds of bones were shipped back to China (64).

After the railroad was completed in 1869, the unemployed Chinese workers had to find new sources of employment. Many found work in agriculture; others found jobs in factories in San Francisco and other cities; still others started small businesses

such as restaurants, laundries, and general stores. In short, the "Chinese were involved in many occupations that were crucial to the economic development and domestication of the western region of the United States" (Fong 19). Instead of giving credit to them for their contributions to the American economy, hostility against the Chinese started in various forms because they were feared as "the yellow peril" that took jobs from white immigrants. "Yellow peril" is a metaphor that refers to the skin color of East Asians based on the belief that mass immigration of Asians threatens white wages and standards of living. The term originated in the late nineteenth century with the immigration of Chinese laborers to Western countries, notably the United States (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yellow_peril). As Shirley Sui Ling Tam indicates, "following passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, anti-Chinese agitation persisted and directly affected Chinese employment" (125). The Chinese, thus, became the victims of racial violence known as the Driving Out.

The "Great Driving Out" of Asians, according to Patti Duncan, "included the expulsion of Chinese from towns and cities all over the American West" (40). During the recession in the late 1870s, "whites competed with Chinese for jobs, and Chinese became the targets of violence and were driven out of small towns and villages and sought refuge in large cities" (Chae 23). Driving Out became more organized in the late 1880s during which time several Chinese communities in the American West were subjected to a level of violence that approached genocide. Chan categorizes the violence against Asians into three patterns: "the maiming and wanton murder of individuals, spontaneous attacks against and the destruction (usually by fire) of

Chinatowns, and organized efforts to drive Asians out of certain towns and cities" (48). The way the Chinese were killed was brutal. Some were shot to death or burned to death. Those escaping into the mountains were exhausted from lack of sleep and food, and died from exposure or were eaten by wolves. In Seattle, Washington, in Rock Springs, Wyoming, and in the Hell's Canyon of Oregon, white rioters started giant raids against Chinatowns. The massacres of twenty-one Chinese in Los Angeles in 1871 and of twenty-eight Chinese in Rock Springs, Wyoming, in 1885 are examples of the worst incidents (Fong 22). Thirty-one Chinese miners in Hell's Canyon, Oregon, were robbed, killed, and mutilated by a group of white ranchers and schoolboys intent on stealing their gold and cleansing the region of their presence (Iris Chang 134). A federal official who invested the crime called it "the most cold-blooded, cowardly treachery" (qtd. in Chang 134).

Hostility against the Chinese was encouraged by immigration exclusionary laws. Earlier in 1878, California held a Constitutional Convention at which new state laws were passed. Hong Kingston refers to some of these laws in *China Men*:

> Though the Chinese were […] building the richest agricultural land in the world, they were prohibited from owning land or real estate. They could not apply for business licenses. Employers could be fined and jailed for hiring them. No Chinese could be hired by state, country or municipal governments for public works. No "Chinese or Mongolian or Indian" could testify in court "either for or against a white man." (153)

In 1906, the San Francisco Board of Education ordered that "all Chinese, Japanese, and

Korean children be segregated in an Oriental school." In 1917, "Congress voted that immigrants over sixteen years of age be required to pass an English reading test" (156). In fact, "racial discrimination against Asians underlying U.S. public policies generated nearly fifty laws between 1850 and 1950, created specifically to restrict and subordinate Asian immigrants" (Duncan 42). The first Exclusion Act (1882) banned the entry of Chinese laborers for ten years. This law was extended in 1892 for another ten years and extended indefinitely in 1904 (*China Men* 154-56). Some of the consequences of the laws, according to Duncan, included "the institutionalization of racism and racial discrimination, the further exploitation of Asian immigrants, and the destruction of Asian family systems and traditional gender and familial roles" (40). Regarding the destruction of the Asian family system, Ronald Takaki states that Asian immigrants "were prevented from forming families. Women from China, Japan, Korea, and India were barred from entering the country, and even U.S. citizens could not bring Asian wives into the country" (14). It is rather unfair that women married to Asians (male) were excluded on the basis of their classification as aliens ineligible for citizenship, while wives of European immigrants were allowed to enter the United States freely.

The laws affected the formation of Chinese American families terribly, contributing to the "bachelor societies" of Asian immigrant men. Chinese immigrants, thus, had to endure sexual repression apart from economic racism. It was not until 1943 that "[t]he United States and China signed a treaty of alliance against the Japanese and Congress repealed the Exclusion Act of 1882." Later, the War Bride Act in 1946 "enacted a separate law allowing the wives and children of Chinese Americans to apply

for entry as ‘non-quota immigrants’” (*China Men* 157).

After women joined their husbands, life did not become any easier. Unlike the Chinese sojourners in the last century, whose dream was to “get rich quickly and retire to their native villages” (Chua 34), the immigrant family in the twentieth century had to hold new dreams. To stay, they had to own a home and become the owner of small businesses because they could only find jobs as cooks, laundrymen, and menial laborers to support themselves. Trying to fulfill their dreams, they suffered no less than their ancestors from political and economic oppression. Apart from laws that denied them ownership of property, there were laws that denied them citizenship along with laws of deportation. For example, although a Presidential proclamation lifted restrictions on immigration for Chinese and nationals of a few other Asian countries in 1938, “the Chinese were still ineligible for citizenship, and the quota was ‘100’” (*China Men* 157). In 1952, the Immigration and Nationality Act denied admission to “subversive and undesirable aliens” and made it simpler to deport “those already in the country” (158).

Kingston places “The Laws” Chapter in the middle of her text for background information, which serves to contextualize not only *China Men* but also the other two texts. For, in every text, there is the problem of Chinese immigrant status and their fear of deportation. It is, therefore, important to explore not only the racial history but also the history of Chinese exclusionary laws in order to do a critical study of Chinese American literature. Learning about the history of Chinese exclusion is important for understanding not only the lives of single husbands such as grandfathers in the nineteenth century and father in the early twentieth century in *China Men*, but also for

understanding the lives of married men such as fathers and husbands in all three texts from the forties to the nineties of the twentieth century.

Goals of the Study

The study of the American Dream as experienced by the Chinese presented in the selected works by Chinese American women writers achieves the following goals: (1) to illustrate that the Chinese in America are a hard-working people who dreamed of getting rich in the new country, but suffered greatly in their struggle to achieve their dreams; (2) to demonstrate that the Chinese in America, as a people, have been resistant to multiple oppressions with strategies for survival against their fate of being Asian and being poor; and (3) to convey that the Chinese in America have contributed remarkably to building America under extremely tough natural, social, economic, and political conditions. There is a strong reason to believe that they should be treated equally. Telling the stories of the Chinese American past for a better society in the future, the authors have tried to negotiate differences between their adopted culture of America and their home culture of China. Their negotiation via the politics of difference is important to understand by both the mainstream and minority cultures for mutual understanding and respect.

Theoretical Approaches

Lisa Lowe's *Immigrant Acts* (1996) serves as the major theoretical framework. According to Lowe, "the history of the racial formation of Asian immigrants and Asian

Americans has always included a ‘class formation’ and a ‘gender formation’ that, mediated through such state apparatuses as the law, articulated a contradiction between capital and racialized, gendered labor” (“Immigration, Citizenship, Racialization” 14). Lowe means that immigration regulations and the restrictions on naturalization and citizenship have racialized and gendered Asian Americans. Up until 1870, as Lowe indicates, “American citizenship was granted exclusively to white male persons; in 1870, men of African descent could become naturalized, but the bar to citizenship remained for Asian men until the repeal acts of 1943-1952.” And, even though “the law changed to reclassify ‘Chinese immigrants’ as eligible for naturalization and citizenship, female immigrants were not included in this reclassification.” As a result, from 1850 until the 1940s, “Chinese immigrant masculinity had been socially and institutionally marked as different from that of Anglo- and Euro-American “white” citizens owing to the forms of work and community that had been historically available to Chinese men as a result of the immigration laws restricting female immigration” (11). In *Racial Castration,* David Eng expresses the view that Asian American male identity is “historically and increasingly characterized by critical intersections in which racial, gender, and economic contradictions are inseparable (17). He states that the “conceptions of Asian American masculinity are historically and psychically bound by the particularities of race, ethnicity, national origin, sexuality, gender, class, and age” (4). Lowe and Eng mean that the issues of race, gender, and class intertwine. Such theories support my study of the American Dream as experienced by the Chinese from the perspectives of race, class, and gender. To analyze how the dreams of the Chinese

American families go wrong and why it is significant for the authors to portray their characters as resistant, I apply theories of other cultural critics such as Edward Said's critique of Orientalism, Gayatri C. Spivak's and Chandra T. Mohanty's Third World Feminism, Judith Butler's poststructural feminism, and Elaine Showalter's "racial and sexual politics" (244). In addition, I appeal to King-kok Cheung's and Shirley Jeok-lin Lim's transnational consciousness to convey the idea of forging connections between Asia and Asian America.

By "racial formation," Lowe means that, in the last century and a half, "Orientalist racializations of Asians as physically and intellectually different from 'whites' predominated" (4), intersecting significantly with immigration exclusion acts and laws against naturalization of Asians (5). Lowe borrows the term "racial formation" from Michael Omi and Howard Winand, who argue that "racial inequality and injustice had much deeper roots" (69). Omi and Winand "link racial formation to the evolution of hegemony, the way in which society is organized and ruled" (72). Said argues against hegemony in his famous *Orientalism* (1978), stating that "Orientalism is a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient." He means that "the relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (3, 5). In "Themes of Resistance Culture," Said refers to the period of "primary resistance" to mean "literally fighting against outside intrusion" in the past and "the period of secondary, that is, ideological resistance" to mean efforts at present against "all the pressures of the colonial system" (*Culture and Imperialism* 209). In "Empire,

Geography, and Culture," he argues that "the struggle [over geography] is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings" (7). These ideological resistance theories apply in my study of the Chinese American dreams and experiences presented in the texts.

When Lowe talks about gender formation, she means that because of the Page Law of 1875 and a later ban on Chinese laborers' spouses, Chinese immigrants lived in "bachelor" communities and were confined to "'feminized' forms of work. In other words, "in conjunction with the relative absence of Chinese wives and family among immigrant 'bachelor' communities and because of the concentration of Chinese men in 'feminized' forms of work — such as laundry, restaurants, and other service-sector jobs — Chinese male immigrants could be said to occupy, before 1940, a 'feminized' position in relation to white male citizens and, after 1940, a 'masculinity' whose *racialization* is the material trace of the history of this 'gendering'" (11-12). Eng also notes that "the Asian American male is both materially and psychically feminized within the context of a larger U.S. cultural imaginary" (2). As a result, emasculation becomes "one of the most damaging stereotypes about Asian Americans" (Cheung, "Re-Viewing Asian American Literary Studies" 10). To challenge such stereotypes, the authors of the texts redefine Chinese American masculinity by portraying China Men as resistant to loneliness and sexual deprivation. I will discuss the stories of Great Grandfather, Grandfather, and Father in *China Men* to illustrate that they are not emasculated victims. Likewise, none of the men in *Bone* and *Typical American* are sexually impotent. It is mostly the hostile social and economic conditions that deprive

them of a regular and happy married life. The authors' efforts to recover Chinese American masculinity critiques the Oriental stereotype of emasculated China Men.

Apart from men, I address the dreams and nightmares of Chinese American women because they are an important part of the family struggle for the American Dream. I discuss how women have to struggle against the double bind of Western patriarchy and Chinese patriarchy to illustrate the plight of women. As women, they are regarded as inferior to men, their voice hence silenced. And, as Chinese women, they are subject to the strict patriarchal values of China in the racist country of America. In the selected texts, specifically, women in all three families suffer from men's sexist abuses. According to Cheung, this is because "Men of color who have been abused in a white society, are often tempted to restore their sense of masculinity by venting their anger and self-hatred at those who are even more powerless — the women and children in their families" (*Articulate Silences* 108). As women themselves, the authors are angry at such colonial patriarchy and national patriarchy. They tell Chinese American women's stories to avenge such hegemonic forces so as to find women's voice.

The study of Chinese American women, in this sense, is significant in that it contributes to Postcolonial feminist studies. Like Minh-ha Trinh, who recognizes "the existence of a Third World in the First World and vice versa" (98), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Chandra T. Mohanty consider women of color in the First World as belonging to the Third World. For Spivak and Mohanty, the problem with Third World Women is that they are either silenced or misrepresented in Western feminist scholarship. Spivak remains clear on Third World Women being systematically

silenced in her critique of Western feminist scholarship. In her article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" she asks time and again the title question and answers it by stating that "the subaltern woman will be as mute as ever" (90). She means that the subaltern women are subject to their masters, their voice hence silenced. In terms of effective communication, Deepika Bahri argues that the subaltern cannot always speak insofar as the "communication comprises not only the act of 'speaking' but also that of the reception, listening, and interpretation" (200). Bahri suggests that the subaltern women cannot speak if the mainstream refuses to listen.

Mohanty critiques the hegemonic Western feminist scholarship for its homogeneous representation of women. Such scholarship assumes the Third World women to be "an already constituted, a coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location or contradictions." She states that the "the average third world woman" is being defined as "ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized" and "sexually constrained" (336-37, 337). What is wrong with Western feminist scholarship, in Mohanty's view, is the universal notion of patriarchy, i.e. the classical notion of men as oppressors and women as oppressed held by these white scholars. This concept is hardly adequate as it stresses the binary "men versus women," and fails to take into account the various socio-political contexts in which women are subjected. Like Spivak who is concerned about the lack of representation or misrepresentation of Third World women, Mohanty is "determined to make an intervention […] in order to create a location for Third World, immigrant, and other marginalized scholars like

[herself] who saw themselves erased or misrepresented within the dominant Euro-American feminist scholarship and their communities " ("Under Western Eyes' Revisited" 503). They claim a minority women's discourse by bringing women of color into feminist studies, aiming to truthfully represent them.

The three selected texts are remarkable contributions to minority women's discourse. The authors cross gender boundaries by portraying their female characters as heroic, persistent, and in some cases, defiant against tradition in their struggle for the American Dream. I will discuss the dreams of women in the texts to demonstrate that the authors have challenged traditional models of womanhood and reconstructed Chinese American women's identities. To understand MaMa in *China Men* and Mah in *Bone*, I apply poststructural feminist theories. Judith Butler, for example, argues that "The very subject of women is no longer understood in stable or abiding terms" (1). She means that women are not the same with each other, no are they the same with themselves in different times or situations. Butler offers a dynamic approach to exploring gender identities, which helps understand the mothers in the two texts, who suffer from sexist treatment by their husbands. At the same time, they work hard to support their families in the struggle for the American Dream.

I base my analysis of sexual behaviors of the wife, Helen, and sister, Theresa, in *Typical American* on what Elaine Showalter terms as "racial and sexual politics." Showalter observes that "Black critics protest the 'massive silence' of feminist criticism about black and Third World women writers and call for a black feminist aesthetic that would deal with both racial and sexual politics" (244). Such "racial and sexual

politics" theory applies in the study of *Typical American*. Portraying Helen and Theresa as sexually defiant in their specific familial and social contexts, the authors demonstrate that Chinese American women are fighting bravely for freedom and power against patriarchy/sexism in Chinese America. The author's presentation of the two women involved in adultery challenges the Oriental stereotype of Chinese women being the passive, docile, ignorant, uneducated, tradition-bound, sexually constrained, and victimized Other.

Lowe's theory about "class formation" applies in the selected texts in that it explains the social and economic conditions of the exploited wage laborers such as the grandfathers in Kingston's *China Men* and the parents in Ng's *Bone*. Throughout the period from 1850 to World War II and from World War II to the present in what Lowe terms as the two "historical phases," Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino laborers were fundamental to the building of the railroads, the agricultural economy, and the textile and service industries." Employed as cheap laborers, Asian immigrants were denied citizenship and ownership of property ("Immigration, Citizenship, Racialization" 12, 8). Gary Okihiro also comments on this political history, indicating that Asian immigrants were "included" in building railroads, in agriculture, in horticulture, etc., but were "excluded" in the written record of history, denial of citizenship and education in white schools. He states in his concluding chapter, "Margin as Mainstream," that "racial minorities, specifically Asian Americans, have in the past repeatedly sought inclusion within the American community, within the promise of American democracy, within the ideals of equality and human dignity and have, just as regularly, been

rebuffed and excluded from that company and ideal" (151). Lowe explains the reason:

> in a racially differentiated nation such as the United State, capital and state imperatives may be contradictory: capital, with its supposed needs of 'abstract labor,' is said by Marx to be unconcerned by the 'origins' of its labor force, whereas the nation-state, with its need for 'abstract citizens' formed by a unified culture to participate in the political sphere, is precisely concerned to maintain a national citizenry bound by race, language, and culture. (13)

Later in American political history, as Chae indicates, "the Immigration Act of 1965 has actually helped to form a racial and class stratification within minority communities, and the reform policy has brought a structural change" (29). This happened because, according to Iris Chang, a great many intellectual elites and their most intellectually capable and scientifically directed children fled Communist revolution in 1949 (x). As a result, unlike earlier Chinese immigrants who had come as unskilled laborers, immigrants of the mid-twentieth century were either professionals or skilled laborers who became small-business owners of groceries or ethnic restaurants, having brought capital to invest under the visa category of investors. Peter Kwong calls those who move away from ethnic communities "Uptown Asians," who are well educated and financially secure as against the other group, the "Downtown Asians," the working class Asians, who live in concentrated ethnic ghettos and suffer from all types of social problems (77).

In the discussion of the portrayal of China Men working as cheap laborers and

suffering from unequal treatment/pay or as owners of small businesses suffering from business failures in *China Men* and *Bone*, and of the "Uptown" Chinese aspiring to make it into the middle and upper middle class in *Typical American*, I argue that the promise of American democracy did not guarantee them equal opportunities. Instead, the Chinese in America, whether they were working class men or "middle class" professionals, could not become part of the American success story. They suffered differently because of their different social and economic conditions. The price they paid was great: failure of businesses, broken families and even the loss of lives of their loved ones. Their stories demonstrate that the Chinese experienced great obstacles in fulfilling their dreams.

Research Methodology

This dissertation is a historical study of the American Dream presented in selected works by Chinese American women writers within American and Chinese American social contexts. To understand the dreams and nightmares of the Chinese in America, I will examine what the American Dream means to them in different periods of history. I will define the Dream differently because it changes over time. That is, as society changes, their needs change. Also, I will analyze the Dream with a transnational consciousness. For, even though the authors claim that they are telling American stories, their home culture values and habits play an important part in the way they experience and present their dreams. As Cheung argues, "the competing impulses of claiming America and maintaining ties with Asia are especially pronounced among

some of these immigrants" ("Re-Viewing Asian American Literary Studies" 7). The selected texts are reflective of such impulses. The authors' middle ground position makes it possible for them to negotiate ethnic and cultural differences.

My approach to the selected works with a transnational consciousness is inspired by the works of Asian literary and cultural critics of the last few years such as *Transnational Asian American Literature* edited by Lim et al. and *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature* by Cheung. According to Lim et al., Asian American literary criticism was said to fall into three periods and thematic categories: critical work produced prior to 1982, works done between 1982 and 1995, and works from 1995 to the present, with thematic categories prominently shaped in the third period. In the first period prior to 1982, "published work was limited to writers of Chinese or Japanese descent, with some attempt to reach Filipino American writers" (6). According to Cheung, Frank Chin's edited book *Aiiieeeee!* (1974), — its sequel *The Big Aiiieeeee!* (1991) as well — presented selected Chinese and Japanese heroic epics as the sources of "Asian heroic tradition" (11). Moreover, "the *Aiiieeeee*! preface, distinguishing between a legitimate U.S. born Asian American subject and a foreign-born immigrant/diasporic Asian subjectivity, valorized a cultural nationalism and argued for a separatist politics" (Lim et al. 6). Marked by their masculinist approach to defining Asian American cultural discourse, the editors "presented the contest over 'Asian American sensibility' as a struggle between American-born Asian Americans and immigrant Asians, and between male writers and female writers" (Lim, "Assaying the Gold" 154). According to Lingyan

Yang, "the *Aiiieeee*! and *The Big Aiiieeeee*! Collective are Frantz Fanon's Asian American brothers, whose masculinist nationalism and nativism feature envy and violence as the necessary structure of the native's subjectivity" (159).

Chin and the editors' masculinist approach to defining Asian American cultural discourse, however, influenced a later debate on the works by major Asian American women writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan (Lim et al. 6). In the second period, between 1982 and 1995, the essays and books by a number of Asian American literary critics prompted the debate on what should constitute the Asian American identity and broadened the notion of an Asian American canon (7). During this time, Elaine Kim, Amy Ling and King-kok Cheung, etc. examined gendered representations in Asian American women's literature (7-8). In such literature, an Asian American consciousness fueled by the urge to claim America has allowed some writers to break with a racist and patriarchal definition of an American national identity (Cheung 9). As a result, Asian American literature has been enriched by the voices of writers of diverse ethnic origins, in whose writings, as has already been cited, "the competing impulses of claiming America and maintaining ties with Asia are especially pronounced" (7).

Asian American criticism may be said to have entered a metacritical phase after 1995, when younger critics, contextualizing their analysis in the discursive tradition established by an older generation of scholars, created a field of referentiality that enables them to elaborate, refute, and reexamine texts in new and different ways (Lim et al. 8). In *Immigrant Acts*, Lowe analyzes racial, class, and gender issues on

political terms, arguing that the law "must be understood as *both* ideological and a repressive state apparatus, as both symptomatic and determining of the relations of production." She argues that immigration laws "have placed Asians 'within' the U.S. nation-state, its workplaces, and its markets, yet linguistically, culturally, and racially marked Asians as 'foreign' and 'outside' the national polity" (14, 8). In *Imagine Otherwise* (2003), Kandice Chuh takes her cue from Lisa Lowe's *Immigrant Acts*, and seeks to move from cultural or national identity discourses to focus on economic and social justice. This drive to move beyond cultural identity politics to economic and social justice politics motivates her study (Lim et al 4). Such economic and social justice politics inspire my study as well.

One other important feature in the third period, according to Lim et al., is that contemporary Asian American criticism is traversed by theories associated with postmodernism, poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, and discourses on globalization, diaspora, transnationalism, and postcolonialism (8). In the area of study guided by multiple disciplines, Asian American literature can no longer be viewed as merely a minor ethnic province of a domestic American canon (22). Rather, as Yang states:

> The worldly intellectual, historical and social boundaries of Asian America have never stopped being redrawn and remapped. The lines between the domestic/Americanized Asian America and global/diasporic postcoloniality have never stopped being crossed or revised. The singular centrism of cultural nationalism has never stopped being challenged. (163)

Hence, Lim, et al. point out that the title and trope of readings across sites and transits

suggest the transmigratory, translational, settling and unsettling peopling of imaginations that has always been a feature of Asian American writing and that has become more remarkable in the late twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries (22). Cheung points out:

> A significant switch in emphasis has occurred in Asian American literary studies. Whereas identity politics — with its stress on cultural nationalism and American nativity — governed earlier theoretical and critical formulations, the stress is now on heterogeneity and diaspora. The shift has been from seeking to "claim America" to forging a connection between Asia and Asian America; from centering on race and on masculinity to revolving around the multiple axes of ethnicity, gender, class and sexuality; from being concerned primarily with social history and communal responsibility to being caught in the quandaries and possibilities of postmodernism and multiculturalism. (1)

Cheung's argument is supported by Asian cultural studies critics such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Minh-ha Trinh. Said, as was quoted earlier, argues against "separatist nationalism toward a more integrative view of human community and human liberation" (*Culture and Imperialism* 217). Bhabha argues that "The very concepts of homogenous national cultures, the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions, or 'organic' ethnic communities — as the grounds of cultural comparativism — are in a profound process of redefinition." Bhabha proposes an alternative space, believing that this space, "in-between the designations of identity,

becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white" (5, 4). Trinh talks back to power, stating that in the postmodern world of heterogeneity and diaspora, "The Master is bound to recognize that His Culture is not as homogeneous, as monolithic as He believes it to be. He discovers, with much reluctance, He is just an other among others" (98-99). These critics suggest negotiating ethnic and cultural differences to achieve mutual understanding and respect. Their call for mutual understanding and respect is important for its theoretical and practical implications in that it helps understand present social conditions so that negotiations between mainstream and minority cultures take place in both directions. The succeeding chapters develop by means of theoretical, historical, and ideological analyses with respect to the three texts under consideration.

Introduction to Chapters

Chapter Two, "The Dreams of 'the Yellow Peril' in Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*" discusses the dreams of four generations of Hong Kingston's working class family from the mid-nineteenth century to the sixties of the twentieth century. Cheung explains the term "Chinamen" by saying that the connotations of "Chinamen" have changed over time. She quotes from Kingston (1978) that "the term distinguished China Men from the Chinese who remained citizens of China, and also showed that they were not recognized as Americans" (Cheung, *Articulate Silence* 101). Later, in a television interview with Bill Moyers in 1990, Kingston said that "she separates the

term into two words — China Men — to replicate the spondaic quality in the Cantonese language and to differentiate her term from the traditional slur" (qtd. in Cheung 101). I use the term China Men to refer to the Chinese in America throughout this chapter.

In *China Men*, according to Cheung, Kingston "reconstructs not only a family saga but also a Chinese American epic … one that gives voice to the many China Men whose presence was for decades unacknowledged in American history" (102). Also, as Julia Lisella states, *China Men* is "a book about work and class." Lisella means that "the story told in *China Men* requires Kingston to confront issues of race and class oppression, in relation to cultural constructions of masculinity" (55, 60). The text covers a history of over one hundred years. I will, therefore, study the lives of both the two grandfathers and father as single husbands in the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; the father as a married man, his wife as a dutiful wife-mother, the daughter-narrator and her brother as mediators of cultures since the forties of the twentieth century.

In the discussion of Hong Kingston's family history, I first examine the dreams/nightmares of Great Grandfather in the Hawaiian "Sandalwood Mountains" and dreams/nightmares of Grandfather building the transcontinental railroad in the American West to illustrate how grandfathers raise their voice against racial cruelty and economic exploitation. I then discuss the life of the father as a business man whose dream is to succeed in owning a home and becoming the owner of his business after his wife joins him in the late 1930s. I explore why his business fails and how he recovers from a mental depression due to his business failures. Third, I pay attention to how

Kingston tells women's stories, for example, the story of MaMa, to illustrate the plight of women who struggle against the double bind of hegemony — Western/colonial patriarchy and Chinese/national patriarchy — in their family struggle for the American Dream. Fourth, I illustrate how China Men resist loneliness and sexual deprivation. Telling the stories of grandfathers who are sexually expressive via fabulous imaginations and Father who marvels at the American dream of freedom in his youthful days as a single husband, believing that the Gold Mountain "was indeed free: no manners, no traditions, no wives" (*China Men* 61), Kingston redefines China Men's masculinity and shows that China Men are not emasculated victims. Fifth, I address how the daughter-narrator shows her anger at her father's sexism at home and how she attempts to recover Chinese American masculinity by offering alternative models of manhood. Lastly, I focus on how Kingston expresses her anti-war motif via the brother who experiences the nightmare of the Vietnam War. In the chapter about her brother, Kingston expresses her desire to bridge races, cultures, and nations. Through her brother, Kingston expresses her American Dream of world peace. I conclude that *China Men* is not about one family. It is about all Chinese immigrants/Chinese Americans, which demonstrates that China Men are not at all passive, silent, and emasculated victims in their struggle for the American Dream. Although their dreams change over time because of different material conditions, China Men have struggled heroically, persistently, and, in some cases, triumphantly for their dreams.

Chapter Three, **"**The Dream of 'The Model Minority' Family in Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* (1993)," discusses how Ng critiques the mainstream representation of the

model minority family. According to Viet Nguyen, "The key themes of model minority — self-reliance versus government assistance, self-sacrifice versus self-interest, and quiet restraint versus vocal complaint in the face of perceived or actual injustice — can all be found in the mainstream literature as moments of conflict for the central characters" (148). In *Bone*, the narrator Leila addresses the dilemma and tensions confronted by her step-father, Leon Leong, her mother, Dulcie Fu, and her two younger sisters in the second half of the twentieth century. She presents, in particular, how her family is torn apart after her middle sister Ona commits suicide.

In this chapter, I explore Leon Leong's family tragedy in San Francisco Chinatown. Leon is a "paper son" to a "paper father" with a "paper history" (Ho 216). I first explore this "paper history" to understand early immigration and analyze how social and economic exclusions deprive Leon of many opportunities to become part of the American success story even though he is a citizen of the United States. I discuss Leon's "bad luck" story and argue that his failed promise to send his paper father's bones to China is not the cause of Ona's suicide as he himself assumes. I will then address how Mah becomes a "fallen woman" in the sense that she is abandoned by her first husband Lyman Fu and that she marries her second husband for her green card. Exploring her "bad luck" story, I argue that her "affair" with her boss Tommie is not the cause of Ona's suicide, either. Third, I pay attention to the stories of the three daughters: Ona, who commits suicide; Nina, who flees to New York; and Leila, who tries to please both her parents and her boyfriend. The three daughters represent three types of cultural values: Ona, the obedient girl, who wants to be filial to her parents,

represents the Chinese values of family loyalty; Nina, the modern girl, who remains indifferent to her family and her sister's suicide, represents the American idea of individual freedom; and Leila, the narrator and the responsible girl, who tries her best to keep the family together, represents both the Chinese value of family loyalty and the American value of individual freedom. Caught between the two cultures, Leila serves as a mediator between her self and family. That is, while she tries to help her parents out in times of trouble, she challenges her mother's work ethic by seeking happiness with her sense of individual freedom. In presenting the relationship of the daughter-narrator with her parents and her two sisters, "the 'I' narrator, create[s] a distinguishable hierarchy based on her attempt to find a center that is neither too Chinese nor too American, thus informing us of the complexity of her Chinese American consciousness" (Gee 129). The author negotiates between her American middle class values of individualism and her home cultural values of family unity.

Chapter Four**, "**The Dreams of 'The Professional Middle Class' Family in Gish Jen's *Typical American* (1991)" discusses how Jen presents Ralph Chang and his family aspiring to make it into America's middle and upper class in the 1950s. Ralph's quest for material gains is ironic because, by then, he has already established a comfortable home: he gets married, has two lovely daughters, gains tenure, purchases a suburban house, much like white American families. Yet, to be a self-made man, he involves himself in a moneymaking scheme by starting a "Chicken Palace" restaurant. His quest upwards, however, results in the collapse of his business. The additional price he pays is greater: Grover Ding, who deceives him into the business, seduces his wife.

His sister, a medical student doing her internship, almost loses her life. To critique man's craving for money, Jen conveys that men are not what they make up their minds to be. Concluding that "America is no America" where Ralph is as doomed as he was in China (Jen 296), Jen exposes the failed promise of the nation, where men can hardly achieve their dreams because of hostile social conditions.

Besides the story of Ralph, I also discuss, in separate sections, how Ralph's wife and elder sister fight against sexism within the home and racism in the larger American society. Through the character of Helen, Ralph's wife, Jen presents both her class and gender themes. Helen is from an upper class family in Shanghai, China. In the first few years of life in America, however, she lives in a shabby New York neighborhood. Being a wife of a poor Chinese student family, Helen changes from a "fragile" upper class girl to a brave housewife with housekeeping and home-making skills. Later, when the family moves to the suburbs of Connecticut, she resists her husband's sexism with various strategies, one of which is involving herself in an affair with the crook, Grover Ding, her husband's business partner. Jen presents her gender theme through Theresa, Ralph's sister, too. She is a doctoral student in medicine but becomes the lover of the husband of her close friend. Contextualizing the two women's behavior, I argue that they are resisting the sexist treatment of them within the home and by the people around them, thus challenging the double bind of patriarchy.

One of the themes in American literature is often the individual in society. For Jen, "the society that really matters is often the family." Jen says that "probably self and family is a big tension along which I write" (qtd. in "Interview by Rachel Lee" 226). When she portrays the tensions between the self and family, she is, at the same

time, negotiating differences. As Kafka argues, Jen conveys that "in order to succeed, Asian Americans must continually combine and recombine elements, sometimes extremely jarring, from both their birth and new cultures. Those who do not are doomed" ("Cheap, On Sale, American Dream" 106). Such bad luck is witnessed in Jen's treatment of her major characters who ignore their Chinese cultural roots in the process of being Americanized. All three characters, Ralph Chang, his wife, Helen, and his elder sister, Theresa, are penalized: Ralph suffering from financial losses, his wife and sister from bodily injuries. By negotiating the conflicts between the individual and the family, Jen, like Kingston and Ng, bridges the values of her birth culture of China and her adopted culture of America.

Chapter V, the concluding chapter, re-articulates the central concerns of this study, states the implications of the research and provides suggestions for future research. The Chinese as portrayed in the three selected texts hold different dreams in different times of history. They struggle for their dreams against hostile racial, social, and political conditions. Their dreams go wrong because of racial discrimination mediated by government immigrant laws. Being aware of such a history will help understand that the American Dream does not provide equal opportunities for the Chinese although they have contributed remarkably to building America. The study of the American Dream as experienced by the Chinese has important theoretical and practical implications in that people should be treated equally regardless of their race, gender, class, and national origin. Negotiating ethnic and cultural differences for mutual understanding and respect, the authors have expressed their lofty dreams of social equity and human emancipation.

Chapter II

THE DREAMS OF THE "YELLOW PERIL" IN MAXINE HONG KINGSTON'S *CHINA MEN*

Introduction

In an interview with Shirley Geok-lin Lim about her two texts, Maxine Hong Kingston indicates that *The Woman Warrior* is "an I-book," a book in which "I can establish who I am." In regard to *China Men*, however, Kingston declares that "I need to get into the point of view of people who are very unlike myself […] My concerns were larger than just myself or even my gender but to write about the other gender and a larger history" ("Reading Back, Looking Forward" 159). True, unlike *The Woman Warrior* in which she tells women's stories, Kingston is writing about men in *China Men*. In fact, when she tells stories about men in her family, she is telling about Chinese American history. In this chapter, I explore the history of the Chinese in America pertaining to their dreams and nightmares. I take Kingston's family as an example and explore what the Chinese American dreams were, what happened to their dreams, and why, in many cases, their dreams became nightmares. I demonstrate how Kingston's grandfathers and father resisted racial subjugation, economic exploitation, and gender oppression, and why it is significant to portray them as resistant. I also discuss the double role of women working in the home and in the labor market in the family struggle for the American Dream. I will explore how women resisted patriarchy/sexism in the home and in their larger Chinese community, how Kingston critiques the Oriental stereotype of China Men being

emasculated, and how she redefines China Men's masculinity. Lastly, I analyze how Kingston expresses her anti-war motif through her brother who experienced the nightmare of the Vietnam War. In the chapter devoted to her brother, Kingston expresses her dream for world peace and her desire to bridge races, cultures, and nations. She conveys that people of all races, classes, cultures, and nations should strive for mutual understanding and respect. Such understanding has important theoretical and practical implications in that people should be treated equally regardless of their race, class, gender, and national origin.

Breaking Silence and Finding a Voice: Great Grandfathers in the Sandalwood Mountains

In her chapter, "China Men: Claiming America," Elaine Kim states that *China Men* is about "the Chinese American experience through family history combined with talk story, memory, legend and imaginative projection" (208). The text is composed of six biographical chapters about four generations of China Men: Great Grandfathers, Grandfathers, The Father from China, The American Father, The Making of More Americans, and The Brother in Vietnam. In between these chapters, there are shorter chapters from one page to about ten pages long which tell either mythic stories or historical events. They are like the layers of sandwiches which make Kingston's writing colorful. They serve to contextualize or symbolize biographical happenings. Two of the short chapters entitled "On Mortality" and "On Mortality Again" ascribe the loss of human immortality to the inability to keep quiet. "On Mortality" tells of a Chinese allegory about Tu Tsu-chun who was tested by a Taoist monk to observe the

rule of silence in order to gain immortality. Transformed from a man into a mute woman through many tests, Tu, however, failed to keep silent when she saw her child being tortured. She broke the silence and thus there was no immortality for the human race. "On Mortality Again" is a Polynesian mythology about Maui,[1] the Trickster, who was seeking immortality for the human race by stealing it from Hina[2] of the Night. Maui entered Hina's body through her vagina and took her heart in his arms. He had started tunneling out feet first when a bird laughed at the sight of his legs wiggling out of the vagina. Hina awoke and shut her vagina, and Maui died (*China Men* 122). Again, there was no immortality for the human race for breaking the silence required.

King-kok Cheung thinks that these two short sections "furnish intertextual responses to the chapter on Bak Goong, 'The Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains,'" who broke the silence imposed upon him by his white bosses (*Articulate Silences* 110). Bak Goong[3] went to the Hawaiian Sandalwood Mountains with beautiful dreams. The agent that recruited him made beautiful promises: "'We are offering free passage, free food, free clothing, and housing.' 'Three years from today, home with riches'" (*China Men* 92). Although Bak Goong did not know the concept of the American Dream, the idea of making money was attractive to him. Impressed, Bak Goong signed a three-year contract, dreaming to get rich quickly and return to his home village in three years. Three years of work as a farm worker was a long time during which Bak Goong endured bodily injuries not only from the backbreaking work but also from the white bosses' whips. Kingston describes the difficult labor of hacking a farm out of the wilderness since there was no ready

sugarcane farm to tend. To level the wilderness from the ocean to the mountain, "Bak Goong was given a machete, a saw, and a pickax. The green that had looked grass at a distance was a tangle of trees so thick that they shut out sunlight. […] Bak Goong chopped into the edge of this strange forest. He could not hold the branches because of the thorns on them" (98).

The plantation had a rule that the farm workers were not allowed to talk at work. This was too much for Bak Goong because he "needed to cast his voice out to catch ideas" (100). He broke the silence by talking and was whipped. Also, "Bak Goong had been fined for talking. And sick men had been docked for every day they had been lying lazy in bed. Those who had not recovered from crossing the ocean got an accounting to how much they owed for food and lodging plus passage. The strong workers had money subtracted for broken tools" (102). Fined for various reasons, China Men were cheated by the promise of riches. To expose such exploitive history, Kingston uses the motif of silence. Breaking the silence imposed upon them, the Great Grandfathers were resisting racial domination and capitalist exploitation. This narrative strategy is meaningful on both literal and figurative levels.

Literally, Kingston depicts Bak Goong as a "talk addict" (110). Having been fined for talking, Bak Goong resorted to singing and coughing. The white boss did not seem to mind the first day he sang so that he thought that he had resolved talking. He boasted to his fellow men, "If that demon whips me, I'll catch the whip and yank him off his horse, crack his head like a coconut" (101). As he was singing these ideas, however, there was a crack next to his ear and he found a cut on his shoulder.

Whipped for singing, Bak Goong resorted to coughing. When the demons[4] howled to work faster, he coughed in reply: "you—dead—white—demon. Don't—stare—at me—with—those—glass—eyes. I can't—take—this—life" (104).

Because of the heavy work and ill treatment, one third of the workmen were sick. Bak Goong diagnosed their illness as "congestion from not talking" and advised them to "talk and talk" (115). To organize the workmen to talk, Bak Goong told the story of Ancient King Midas in Greek Mythology. The King is popularly remembered for his ability to turn everything he touched into gold: the Midas touch. Kingston, however, claims that she is telling a Chinese story. In her version, the King wished to have a son for years. When he finally had a son, the son had cat ears. The King kept this a secret until he could hold it no longer. One day, he dug a hole in the ground and shouted his secret into it: "The King's son has cat ears." Satisfied after letting out his secret, he pushed the dirt back into the hole and stamped it down. The next spring, however, the buried words spread throughout the land and people could hear: "The King's son has cat ears" (117).

Inspired by the King's story, the farm workers dug a hole in the ground on the following day to start their sounds of battle against the rule of silence. They told the earth their secrets of how much they missed home: "'I want home,' Bak Goong yelled, pressed against the soil, and smelling the earth. 'I want my home,' the men yelled together. 'I want home. Home. Home. Home. Home'" (117). They made such a noise that their white bosses, not knowing what they were up to, did not come charging upon them. The shout party was a victory. From the day of the shout party,

"Bak Goong talked and sang at his work and did not get sent to the punishment fields" (118). Such 'skill of… deceits," as Donald Geollnicht comments, "brought success to the forefathers in their times of oppression" ("Tang Ao in America" 204). Breaking the silence imposed upon him, Bak Goong found his voice by singing, coughing, and organizing a shout party. After the shout party, Bak Goong told his workmen: "We can make up customs because we're the founding ancestors of this place" (*China Men* 118). Claiming America, Bak Goong demanded being treated equally by the dominant culture.

Telling the story of the shout party over the spot inseminated with words in the grandfathers' chapter, Kingston ends Bak Goong's story with the following words: "the new green shoots would rise, and when in two years the cane grew gold tassels, what stories the wind would tell" (118). It was not two years but generations passed before a great-granddaughter came to the Sandalwood Mountains seeking her ancestral voices: "I have heard the land sing. I have seen the bright blue streaks of spirits whisking through the air" (90). Listening to the voice of her ancestors, Kingston imagines their life and tells stories about them. With her remarkable story-telling technique, Kingston portrays the forefathers as resistant to the rule of silence. Such a portrayal is significant. According to Frank Chin, one measure of the success of white racism is the silence of the minority race and the amount of white energy necessary to maintain or increase that silence (qtd. in Cheung, *Articulate Silences* 7). In the case of Bak Goong and his fellow workmen, silence had been forced upon them by white authority in punishments of all kinds, thus serving as a

form of racial domination. Speaking out, they not only expressed their angry feelings, but also resisted being exploited as cheap racial laborers.

Silence is an important topic in the discussion of Asian American literature and other literatures. In mainstream feminist perspectives, however, silence is solely attributed to patriarchal construction of womanhood. Cheung, however, addresses the silencing of Chinese American men. She comments that Kingston is skeptical about "the representation of her male ancestors, and she deploys polyphony against male and white authority together" (*Articulate Silence* 102). Cheung indicates several ways in which silence is imposed: silence "can be imposed by the family in an attempt to maintain dignity or secrecy, by the community in adherence to cultural etiquette, or by the dominant culture in an effort to prevent any voicing of minority experiences" (3). Bak Goong and his fellow workmen broke the silence in the sense of resistance to the dominant culture's effort to prevent them from voicing their experiences. Having them speak out with "the skills of deceit" such as singing, coughing, and organizing a shout party, Kingston portrays them as resourceful people, rather than being silent, docile, and inferior with feeble mental abilities. Raising their voices, Bak Goong and his workmen claimed that they were the founding fathers of America. As founding fathers, they demanded being treated equally. In this sense, their resistance to racial domination and economic exploitation was a heroic struggle for social equity.

In a figurative sense, on account of the fact that the Chinese American presence was unacknowledged in American history, Cheung argues that "[m]ale silence also manifests itself as the suppression of an Asian past" (9). That is, while

most people are familiar with Chinese men doing feminized jobs in the laundry or restaurants, not many young people know about their heroic deeds in pioneering sugarcane plantations or building the railroads. According to Patti Duncan, such a lack of knowledge about Asian American history exists "within a context of racism, stereotyping, anti-immigrant sentiment, and the rendering insignificant of most actions or events involving Asian Americans" (32-33). Telling the stories of her forefathers contributing to building America, Kingston breaks the suppression of the Chinese American past. Fully aware that most readers would be unable to adequately contextualize her writing, Kingston "bricolages" her genre, that is, she creates an alternative form with *China Men* — part fiction, part autobiography, part history to compensate for her readers' lack of knowledge about the Chinese American past. Fictional representations of imposed silence in the short sections such as "On Mortality" and "On Mortality Again," in this sense, help express her theme of resistance to the silence imposed by the dominant culture upon the Chinese laborers in the Haiwaiian sugarcane fields. Such resistance, as I have argued, reflects China Men's struggle against racial domination and capitalist exploitation.

Resisting Capitalist Exploitation and Racial Violence: Grandfathers of the Sierra Nevada Mountains

Kate Liu indicates that *China Men* is a composite of historical facts ("The Laws"), biographical stories (the narrator's stories about herself and the people she knows), and mythic legends (stories from classical Chinese texts). Liu says that "the multiple texts are related to each other thematically" (2). "The Laws" chapter in the

middle of the text sets the historical context in which China Men experienced legal injustice and physical violence against them. The chapter starts with the Burlingame Treaty of 1868, which allowed free mutual migration and emigration between the two countries. The year of the Burlingame Treaty, however, was the year 40,000 miners of Chinese ancestry were Driven Out (*Chine Men* 152). As is stated in Chapter I, Driving Out is a period of terror during which several Chinese communities in the American West were subjected to a level of violence that approached genocide. It had extended to Alaska as well. Right after "The Laws" chapter is a short chapter entitled "Alaska China Men," in which Kingston recounts the Driving Out in some detail. During one such event, some American citizens wrote to the governor to send for help: "They are commencing the dynamiting business against the Chinese" (161-62). The two short chapters, "The Laws" and "Alaska China Men," include historical facts that furnish the intertextual responses to the chapter about Ah Goong, "The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains," who contributed to the building of the transcontinental railroad but was subjected to Driving Out after the railroad was completed.

Shirley Sui Ling Tam indicates that large scale employment of Chinese in the building of the Central Pacific Railroad beginning in 1865 played the greatest role in the shift from independent gold mining to toilsome wage labor (125). Kingston reflects such history in *China Men* by telling the story of the railroad workers. Grandfather, Ah Goong, was one of those railroad men who labored dangerously and heroically in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The Central Pacific "hired him on sight; chinamen had a natural talent for explosions. Also, there were not enough working men to do all the

labor of building a new country" (*China Men* 128). Like Bak Goong, Ah Goong and his fellow railroad workers dreamed their Gold Mountain dreams. For them, America was a land of wealth and opportunity. The Gold Mountain, as Cheng Lok Chua indicates, "succinctly suggests the dream of the first Chinese who came to America in the pursuit of frankly materialist goals — to get rich quickly and retire to their native villages" (34). The idea of getting rich attracted Ah Goong just as it had attracted Bak Goong a few years earlier. Instead of getting rich quickly, unfortunately, Ah Goong ended up working as a railroad construction worker for years. Sucheng Chan describes the most dangerous part of building the railroad:

> The first true test the Chinese faced was a huge rock outcrop called Cape Horn, around which no detour was possible. To carve a ledge on the rim of this granite bulk, Chinese were lowered by rope in wicker baskets from the top of cliffs. While thus dangled, they chiseled holes in the granite into which they stuffed black powder. Fellow workers pulled them up as the powder exploded. Those who did not make it died in the explosions. (31)

In *China Men*, Ah Goong was doing this dangerous job. Because he was thin and light, Ah Goong was among those who were to be lowered down from the top of the cliff in a wicker basket to where they had to insert gunpowder and fuses. He had to strike match after match, and when at last his fuse caught, he waved, and the men above pulled hand over hand, hauling him up, pulleys creaking. It was the most dangerous job setting charges, and each time, some basket men died from explosions. Some simply fell off the basket into the valley. The work became more dangerous

when they had to use dynamite through the granite, and more people died. The railroads lost track of how many people died. According to Iris Chang, on average, "for each two miles of track laid, countless workers perished in accidental blasts. Eventually, more than one thousand Chinese railroad workers died, and twenty thousands pounds of bones were shipped back to China" (63-64).

China Men also suffered from cold and snowfalls in winter. Sucheng Chan quotes from one of the Central Pacific's engineers who admitted that "a good many men" (i.e., Chinese) were lost during the terrible winter of 1867. The bodies of those buried by avalanches could not even be dug out until the following spring (31). Iris Chang describes that "When the snow melted in the spring, the company found corpses still standing erect, their frozen hands gripping picks and shovels" (61). Chang states, however, "the greatest threat would come not from the harshness of nature, but from the cruelty of fellow humans and the racism endemic to their beloved 'Gold Mountain'" (25). Doing the toughest and most dangerous work under tough natural conditions, they were not treated well. Instead, they endured whippings from their overseers like slaves. Also, to make them work faster, the white bosses invented various games: "China Men against Welshmen, China Men against Irishmen, China Men against Injuns and black demons. The fastest races were China Men against China Men, who bet on their own teams" (*China Men* 139). China Men were deceived in other ways. Ah Boong, for example, was cheated by a demon in a white suit. Calling himself Citizenship Judge, the man said, "'I Citizenship Judge invite you to be U.S. Citizen. Only one bag of gold.' 'You vote,' 'You talk in

court, buy land, no more chinaman tax.'" Excited, "Ah Goong bought it [citizenship papers] with one bag of gold" and "hid [them] on his person so that it would protect him from arrest and lynching" (142). The citizenship papers were fake, as it turned out years later, when BaBa was interrogated at the immigrant office and informed that "There are no such things as Citizenship Judges" (59).

Six days a week, China Men toiled from sunrise to sunset, subject to whipping by overseers and forbidden by the company to quit their jobs. Racism and "ethnic antagonism" led to a dual-wage system in which the Chinese were paid less than their white counterparts. Irish Chang quotes from Charles Crocker, the Central Pacific's chief contractor, who recalls that "I think we were paying $35 a month and board to white laborers, and $30 a month to Chinamen and they boarded themselves" (58). Chang explains that "[t]he Chinese worked longer and harder than whites, but received less pay: because the Chinese had to pay for their own board, their wages were two-thirds those of white workers and a fourth those of the white foremen" (61). Paying China Men less, however, the management wanted them to work more. They promised a four-dollar raise per month if they agreed on a ten-hour shift inside the tunnels. The workmen could not take it: "'A human body can't work like that.' 'The demons don't believe this is a human body'" (*China Men* 141). To bargain, China Men sent a delegation of English speakers and demanded forty dollars a month on an eight-hour shift, but their demands were turned down. The workmen, therefore, decided to go on strike, demanding equal treatment with the white workers. Ah Goong and his fellow workmen practiced their strike slogan: "Eight hours a day

good for white man, all the same good for China Man" (141).

Kingston documents that the strike began on June 25, 1867 and lasted nine days. Different from strikes in other literatures, China Men went on strike in their special way. As was their way in a strange land, they conducted their strike politely, appointing their headmen to present a list of demands that included more pay and fewer hours in the tunnels (Iris Chang 62). Kingston recounts the polite strike: while their English-speaking China Men went to the demons' headquarters repeating their demands, the workmen simply walked off the job and relaxed. Some were sleeping; some were bathing in streams; some were gambling at their cards and tiles; some were playing their musical instruments; some were beating their drums at the punch lines of jokes; some were singing Peking operas;[5] some were making up verses and laughing at their rhymes; some were telling stories; some went fishing and hunting; and some were sifting for gold (141). Instead of resorting to violence, China Men went on strike quietly. Crocker, the contractor of the Central Pacific, marveled at the orderliness of the strike: "If there had been that number of whites in a strike, there would have been murder and drunkenness and disorder. […] But with the Chinese it was just like Sunday. These men stayed in their camps. They would come out and walk around, but not a word was said; nothing was done" (qtd. in Chang 62).

In their studies, both Duncan and Chang note that Chinese railroad workers organized a strike involving two thousand men and that the strike was forced to stop after a week because the management stopped payments to the Chinese and cut off their food supply by Crocker, the director of the railroad, effectively starving them

back to work (Duncan 53, Chang 62). But Kingston rewrites such history by having China Men achieve a compromise victory after a nine-day strike: they got the eight-hour shift in the tunnels with a four dollar raise, not the fourteen dollars they had asked for (*China Men* 144). The strike, though quiet, according to Ronald Takaki, proves the structured resistance of the railroad workers and effectively "demonstrated group solidarity and organized resistance to economic discrimination and exploitation." The strike "could enable men and women of various nationalities to gain a deeper understanding of themselves as laborers, to develop a working-class identity and consciousness" (150). Kingston has tactfully shown us that striking in a strategic way constitutes an equally effective expression of labor resistance.

After years of hard work, danger and deaths, the railroad was completed in 1869 and China Men cheered with the white men. However, when the American officials acclaimed the "Greatest Feat of the Nineteenth Century," "The Greatest Feat in the History of Mankind," declaring only Americans could have done it (*China Men* 145), they did not have China Men in mind. Instead, "the Central Pacific Railroad who cheated the Chinese railway workers of everything they could, tried to write the Chinese out of history altogether" (Iris Chang 63-64). Like great grandfathers in Hawaii's Sandalwood Mountains whose history was repressed, the Chinese railroad men "are not recorded by the white historians who are deaf to their contributions" (Cheung, *Articulate Silence* 110). Such repressed history haunts the American-born narrator. In an interview with Timothy Pfaff, Kingston expresses her feelings about the lack of awareness about Chinese American history within the United States: "That

ignorance makes a tension for me, and in [*China Men*] I just couldn't take it anymore" (qtd. in Duncan 32). Kingston, therefore, claims China Men's contribution to building the transcontinental railroad:

> They built railroads in every part of the country — the Alabama and Chattanooga Railroad, the Houston and Texas Railroad, the Southern Pacific, the railroads in Louisiana and Boston, the Pacific Northwest, and Alaska. After the Civil War, China Men banded the nation North and South, East and West, with crisscrossing steel. They were the binding and building ancestors of this place. (*China Men* 146)

Kingston declares that even if Ah Goong had not spent half his gold on Citizenship Papers, he was an American for having built the railroad (145). She claims China Men's right to stay by asserting their contribution to building America. In Chinese American history, however, as Lisa Lowe states in her "Immigration, Citizenship, Racialization," the American citizen has been defined against the Asian *immigrant*, legally, economically, and culturally, although they are a necessary racialized labor force within the domestic national economy (4). Lowe points out:

> Orientalist racializations of Asians as physically and intellectually different from 'whites' predominated especially in periods in which a domestic crisis of capital was coupled with nativist anti-Asian backlash, intersecting significantly with immigration exclusion acts and laws against naturalization of Asians in 1882, 1924, and 1934. (5)

These racializations "cast Asian immigrants as the contradictory, confusing,

unintelligible elements to be marginalized and returned to their alien origins" (4). Chinese men, as the biggest Asian immigrant group, were the first targeted group affected by exclusionary laws despite their contributions to America. A most terrible effect of exclusionary and naturalization laws is the racial violence against Chinese immigrants in the period known as the Driving Out.

Driving Out, as is explained in Chapter I, started soon after the railroad was completed. The deep-seated racism exaggerated the presence of Chinese laborers as a menace to the American economy. Feared as the "Yellow Peril" that would "overtake the nation and wreak social and economic havoc," the Chinese laborers faced fierce opposition from American workers (Fong 195). Kingston describes the cruel racial happenings in the grandfather chapter. As a jobless and homeless wanderer, Ah Goong observed: "In China bandits did not normally kill people, the booty [was] the main thing, but here the demons killed for fun and hate" (*China Men* 146). Ah Goong "slid down mountains, leapt across valleys and streams, crossed plains, hid sometimes with companions and often alone, and eluded bandits" during the Driving Out of Tacoma, Seattle, Oregon City, Albania, and Marysville (146, 148). He survived by escaping, hiding, and disappearing from the sites of violence, looking not at all scared. Instead, wherever he escaped to, he enjoyed himself with diversions. On a farm road, for example, he came across an imp child playing in the dirt. He sat on the ground with his legs crossed, and the child climbed into the hollow of his arms and legs: "'I wish you were my baby,' he told it. 'My daughter,' he said. 'My son.' He couldn't tell whether it was a boy or a girl" (147). When

he escaped to Sacramento, as another example, he spent his railroad money on the theater where he recognized the faces of Chinese war heroes — Guan Yu, Chang Fei and Liu Bei.[6] Excited, he called out: "Guan Goong, the God of War, also God of War and Literature, had come to America" (149). Ah Goong felt refreshed and inspired to see "Guan Goong,[7] Grandfather Guan, our own ancestor of writers and fighters, of actors and gamblers, and avenging executioners who mete out justice" (150). Fabulously imaginative, Ah Goong found solace in Chinese war heroes in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms,*[8] one of the four most famous Chinese classics.

Such a portrayal of Ah Goong is interesting. By appealing to strategies of survival rather than direct confrontation with violence, he survived the hard times. This is a different kind of heroism from the traditional model of manhood, in which only such masculine values as competitive individualism and martial valor, personal integrity and honor, and the ethic of private revenge are valued. Kingston challenges traditional masculinity by reinventing a heroic tradition of her own. Bak Goong's heroism lies in his "skills of deceit" with which he broke the silence imposed upon him. Ah Goong's heroism lies in his courage to set charges in a wicker basket and in his skills to hide, to disappear, and to survive the dangerous Driving Out. Portraying the grandfathers as resourceful people, Kingston not only challenges the traditional model of manhood, but also critiques the Oriental stereotypes of the Chinese being the victimized Other with unintelligent mental abilities.

Stereotypes of Asian/Chinese immigrants as meek, timid, passive and docile are witnessed in literature of all forms, in the newspapers, fiction and film, etc. Fong

indicates that "[t]he theme of the 'Orientals' being the 'other' was a consistent theme in Hollywood films for decades" (196). Tam examines the stereotypical portrayal of the Chinese in American periodicals based on her belief that "they reached an expanding middle class and became influential in shaping public opinion" (124). Tam quotes from important politicians. Californian senator Julius Kahn, for example, describes in the *Independent* the coolie stereotype of the Chinese as "docile machines with feeble mental abilities" endowed with "a devil-born capacity for doing more work than [they] ought" (129). George C. Perkins, a successful San Francisco businessman who had been a state senator, governor of California, and then a U.S. Senator, expressed the same idea in *North American Review*, describing the Chinese work habit unfavorably as emerging from an old and backward civilization and feared they would eventually undermine "a civilization of a high plane" (129). Throughout Chinese American history, "the Chinese workers remained a marginal presence in the labor markets and were [are] still viewed through the lenses of the nineteenth century stereotype: submissive, inferior, parasitic, alien" (Tam 135).

Such stereotypes often color the reading of Asian/Chinese American literature because general readers tend to see alien literature in terms that are familiar to them, however irrelevant these terms may be to the literature under study. Such attitudes, in turn, inform many of the mainstream stereotypes. The portrayal of her forefathers being resistant to racial and economic oppressions challenges the mainstream stereotypical representations of Chinese immigrants. Such a portrayal is reflective of the theories held by Asian cultural critics. In his famous *Orientalism*, Edward Said

argues that “Orientalism is more particularly valuable as a sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient than it is a veridic discourse about the Orient” (6). Arguing that the Orient is misrepresented, because “dominance and power over the Orient” are complicated historical facts that no European literature can truthfully reflect, Said claims a minority discourse to truthfully represent the Orient. Contributing to such discourse, Kingston portrays her forefathers as resistant to racial domination and economic exploitation. Claiming the voice of early Chinese immigrants, Kingston breaks the silence at various significant levels so as to make known the repressed Chinese American history.

Struggling in Business:
Father in Eastern and Western United States

To expose the miserable life of the Chinese in America, Kingston “hybridizes national history and culture by using both Chinese and American intertexts, more specifically, by consciously mimicking/transforming the national myth of origin and colonial texts” (Liu 2). In the short chapter, “The Adventures of Lo Bun Son,” Kingston retells the story of *Robinson Crusoe* by English novelist Daniel Defoe. Kingston literally translates Robinson’s name into Cantonese which sounds like *Lo Bun Son.* In Chinese culture, names carry meanings. Kingston explains the name:

> *Lo* is “toil,” … *Lo* means “naked,” man “naked animal,” and *Lo* also sounds like the word for “mule,” a toiling sexless animal. *Bun* is the uncle who went to China to work on a commune. And *Sun* is like “body” and also “son” in English and “grandson” in Chinese. *Lo Bun Sun* was a

> mule and toiling man, naked and toiling body, alone, son and grandson, himself all the generations. (226)

The name *Lo Bun Son* gives a striking image of Chinese immigrants working like toiling, sexless animals. In another short chapter, "On Fathers," Kinston describes the fact that the children frequently took other men for their father and called them BaBa. On one occasion, MaMa remarked: "He did look like Baba, though, didn't he? From the back, almost exactly" (7). Such remarks imply that China Men have the same immigration backgrounds. That BaBa is indistinguishable from other men to the children is pitiful: BaBa was too busy to spend time with his family. The short chapter, "On Fathers," precedes "The Father from China" chapter, while the Lo Bun Son chapter precedes "The American Father" chapter, foreshadowing the struggle of Chinese immigrants who work hard to make a living in the United States.

In the chapter, "The Father from China," Kingston tells the story of BaBa before he emigrated to America. He took the last Emperor Examination at the age of fourteen. Having failed to become a government official, he became a village teacher, instead. But he was not happy with his teaching job. He joined the adults in their discussion about the Gold Mountain and dreamed about his future in America. Although his mother thought he was too young for emigration, his wife encouraged him: "You will make a lot of money," and "You'll come home rich" (*China Men* 46). In 1924, BaBa emigrated to America with beautiful Gold Mountain dreams.

Kingston imagined his entry in a number of different ways: illegal entry in a crate on a ship and legal entry by way of Cuba, Angel Island or Ellis Island as a

"paper son." "Paper son" entry[9] was a popular practice at the time when families purchased citizenship papers for young boys from earlier sojourners. After BaBa set foot on the new land, he could no longer work as a scholar. Instead, he did lowly jobs such as washing windows on Fifth Avenue: "I washed all these windows," he told his wife when she joined him fifteen years later. He explained that "When I first came here, I borrowed a squeegee and rags and a bucket, and walked up and down this street. I went inside each store and asked if they wanted the windows washed" (70). In that way, BaBa had made the money to pool for starting the laundry. The laundry men worked late into the night with no holidays. BaBa did the bookkeeping and practiced his calligraphy when others were asleep. Sometimes, he spoke the verses of "The Laundry Song":

> Years pass and I let drop but one homesick tear.
>
> A laundry lamp burns at midnight.
>
> The laundry business is low, you say,
>
> Washing out blood that stinks like brass—
>
> Only a Chinaman can debase himself so.
>
> But who else wants to do it? Do you want it? (63)

Before he left for America, Baba had not dreamed of a life like this. He had said that "I have a diploma," believing that "all you have to do is stay alert; play a little less than they do, use your memory, and you'll become a millionaire" (45, 51). The villagers, however, thought otherwise: "Just because he's skinny and too weak for physical labor, he thinks the white demon will say he's obviously a scholar. But

they can't tell a teacher's body from a laborer's body" (45). The villagers were right. Transformed from a Chinese "poet-scholar" (书生) to a laundry man in America, BaBa was bullied by people of all colors. He was cheated by gypsies, harassed by the police and driven out of business by his business partners. It must have hurt him more than ever when he found that his own fellow country men had "ganged up on him and swindled him out of his share of the laundry" (73). They showed him the license — "registered with the demon courts" without his name. They were not appreciative of the fact that he was doing the bookkeeping for them late into the night and that his wife was doing the cooking and cleaning for them. The only excuse they gave was that he was always reading when they were working. It did not help when he claimed that "We had a spoken partnership. We shook hands. We gave one another our word" (73). There was nothing else he could do but leave the laundrymen. His first Gold Mountain dream of owning part of the laundry business turned nightmarish.

After he was driven out of business, BaBa and his wife set off for California. In "The American Father" chapter right after the story of "*Lo Bun Son*," Kingston depicts the story of BaBa managing a gambling house, which belonged to the most powerful Chinese American in Stockton, California. The owner of the casino, a fellow ex-villager, paid his and his wife's travel fares. To repay him, both husband and wife worked for them — BaBa at the casino and MaMa as their house servant. The years of working at the gambling house were dismal: "He worked twelve hours a day, no holidays," MaMa said. "Even on New Year's, no day off. He couldn't

come home until two in the morning" (244). Even so, he could not make a comfortable home. Kingston describes their life:

> We ate rice and salted fish, which is what peasants in China eat. Everything was nice except what MaMa was saying, "We've turned into slaves. We're the slaves of these villagers who were nothing when they were in China. I've turned into the servant of a woman who can't read." (245)

And they lived in a shabby household:

> In addition to a table and crates, we had for furniture an ironing board and an army cot, which MaMa unfolded next to the gas stove in the wintertime. … When Baba came home, he and MaMa got into the cot and pretended they were refugees under a blanket tent. (246)

The family lived in such poverty. To improve his family life, BaBa worked hard to save for a house. When he saved enough money, he asked the owner of the gambling house to negotiate a cash sale because he did not know much English. But twice the casino owner bought the house for himself, explaining that BaBa could rent from him: "It'll save you money, especially since you're saving to go back to China. You're going back to China anyway" (245), the owner said to him.

The gambling house BaBa managed in his name was illegal, which means he would take the blame for the real owner if found out by the police. During World War II, the police raided the gambling house. Luckily, BaBa was not jailed or deported, but neither he nor the owner worked in gambling again. The loss of the

gambling house, according to Julia Lissella, shows that "the second generation, [Kingston's] father's generation, is caught up more tightly in the bureaucracy of immigration, in the strange customs of the immigration officials" (65). Referring to this loss, Wendy Ho remarks, BaBa's "failure to achieve the 'American Dream' records the brutalizing psychosocial, economic, and political subordination and exploitation practiced in this country against Chinese Americans" (203). BaBa's disillusionment with the American Dream seems to have shrunk his mental horizon. Subdued, he fell into a serious depression and lost "not only his voice but also his humor" (Cheung, *Articulate Silences* 113). For a long time, BaBa was disheartened: "He was always home. He sat in his chair and stared, or he sat on the floor and stared. He stopped showing the boys the few *kung fu* moves he knew" and "screamed wordless male screams that jolted the house upright and staring into the night" (*China Men* 13). He "screamed in his sleep," too (251). Unable to return to China like his forefathers for various reasons, BaBa was here to stay, and staying, as it turned out, "entails a brutal self-transformation" (Cheung 113). It took BaBa several months to figure things out after which he cheered up. He got out of his chair and returned home with news of purchasing a laundry which one of his friends happened to sell. Like the grandfathers who heroically survived difficult times, the Chinese father was "heroic, too, in his ambitions for himself and for his family" (Ho 202). The opening of his laundry demonstrates the heroism of BaBa in the struggle against business failures to achieve the American Dream.

As BaBa stayed with his family in America, his American Dream changed.

Unlike his forefathers whose dream was to make money quickly and return to their home country, BaBa and other immigrants dreamed to become "owners of small businesses" because self-employment offered one method of economic advancement (Duncan 38). Chinese immigrants at that time could only find jobs in segregated labor markets where they earned the lowest wages. Owning a business, therefore, was a means and strategy for survival, a way to control their own labor, and "a response to racial discrimination and exclusion in the labor market" (Takaki 13). It was, however, no easy job owning a business under the economic regime of capitalism. In the first place, Chinese immigrants were not only denied citizenship, but also ownership of property. The Alien Land Laws of 1913, 1920, and 1923, for example, prohibited Asian immigrants from owning land and other forms of property through the legal construction of nonwhites as "aliens ineligible to citizenship" (Lowe, 13). The threat to the Chinese community, in the second place, was not wholly external, or entirely the result of the dominant culture's social, political, economic, and legal racism. Some of the responsibility fell on the Chinese American community itself. As Geollnicht indicates, "this society is wounded from within" ("Of Bones and Suicide" 318). True, Father's first partnership with his fellow laundrymen was established on a "spoken partnership" and his second on a false ownership, i.e. he owned the laundry in the name of a casino owner who did not legally own the business. Despite all these failures, BaBa eventually succeeded in owning his laundry, which demonstrates the heroism of China Men against adverse racial and economic conditions. Portraying BaBa as a successful business owner,

Kingston challenges the stereotypical images of Chinese immigrants being the docile and victimized Other.

In the business struggle against his fate of being Asian and being poor, BaBa went through not only failures but also fears, the fears of being deported because of the exclusive laws that denied China Men their citizenship. In both *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, Kingston describes such fears. In the former text, the young daughter-narrator Maxine was resentful of her parents as she was prevented from revealing their real names, birthdays, or occupations. In the latter, the grown-up Maxine understood the keeping of such secretes with good humor. Describing the gambling house that belonged to the most powerful Chinese American in Stockton, Kingston writes:

> He paid my father to manage it and to pretend to be the owner. BaBa took the blame for the real owner. When the cop on the beat walked in, BaBa gave him a plate of food, a carton of cigarettes, and a bottle of whiskey. Once a month, the police raided with a paddy wagon, and it was also part of my father's job to be arrested. He never got a record, however, because he thought up a new name for himself every time. […] He had the power of naming. (242)

BaBa's making up names became the power of naming now. The police never found out his real names or that he had an American name at all. BaBa felt proud of his witty power: "I got away with aliases," he said, "because the white demons can't tell one Chinese name from another or one face from another" (242). Such "skills of

deceit" against police harassment is one way of showing father's strategy for survival. It was a kind of heroism Kingston honors.

Resisting Racism and Patriarchy: MaMa Holding Half the Sky[10]

Kingston is sympathetic with the mortification of Chinese men in the new world, but she is also angry with the sexism they exercised at home as a result of the double bind of patriarchal values. To counter patriarchy, Kingston portrays MaMa as strong and powerful in her struggle against racism in America and sexism in China and Chinese America. She worked hard to help support the family in what she called the "terrible ghost country where a human being works her life away" (*The Woman Warrior* 104). First of all, she had to adjust to her fall in social status. In China, she was a village doctor, enjoying respect and privilege from the villagers. After she joined her husband in America, she could no longer use her medical degree and skills. The first day she set foot in New York, she started to work, helping her husband and his fellow laundrymen cook, wash, and clean the house. When they started a family in Stockton, California, MaMa took full responsibility for looking after the family of six children. And when her husband was out of a job, she took the role of a bread winner, doing manual labor in the fields and canneries. Bonnie Khaw-Posthuma remarks that MaMa "demonstrates the complex roles of many early twentieth century Chinese American females: they assumed the dual responsibilities of husband and wife as they both preserved family unity and Chinese cultural values within the home and worked outside the home to earn money for their family's

survival" (267).

Cheung argues that "*China Men* is devoted almost exclusively to historical and communal portraits of men, yet the feminist in Kingston is not mute" (*Articulate Silences* 100). While telling men's stories, Kingston expresses how femininity is imposed on the racial "other" by drawing connections between sexual and racial subjugation. The Tang Ao legend about gender reversal, for example, is "double edged, pointing not only to the mortification of Chinese men in the new world, but also to the subjugation of women both in old China and in America" (240). Like Tang Ao, who was transformed from a man in China into a woman in North America, China Men were emasculated, doing feminine jobs under American "Patriarchy." Put into women's shoes, China Men should have been sympathetic with the subjugated position of women in their patriarchal culture. This was, however, not often the case. Instead, having been forced into "feminine" subject positions, China Men tended to "seek to reassert their patriarchal power by denigrating a group they perceive as weaker than themselves: Chinese American women" (Goellnicht, "Tang Ao in America" 200). Women from China, therefore, had to cope with sexism at home in the racist American society.

Working hard had meaning for Chinese American women because "it enabled them to fulfill their filial obligations as well as provide a better future for their children" (Yung, qtd. in Ho 203). Understanding such obligations, MaMa tried her best to keep her family together as a wife and mother. She understood her husband's pain and anger when he lost his casino business. When he "screamed wordless male

screams that jolted the house upright," she would move from bed to bed, soothing her children: "That was just BaBa having a bad dream. Bad dreams mean good luck" (*China Men* 13, 14). Yet, she had to goad her husband into resuming his role as the bread winner:

> You Poet. You scholar. What's the use of a poet and a scholar on the Gold Mountain? You're so skinny. You're not supposed to be so skinny in this country. You have to be tough. You lost New York laundry. You lost the house with the upstairs. You lost the house with the back porch. (248)

MaMa explained to her children that "it's a wife's job to scold her husband into working" (247). Meanwhile, she took good care of her husband, cooking food and preparing Chinese medicine to heal him. Eventually, she succeeded in helping him start his new laundry business. Coping with her husband's sexist behavior skillfully in the face of racial subjugation at the intersection of both Chinese and American patriarchal cultures, MaMa became the preserver of family values, putting family interest over her individual freedom and happiness, thereby protecting her husband and their six children successfully. Ho comments that MaMa "exercises a level of agency and power as a mother and wife, but she carries the heavy burdens of her family's survival as well" (203). Holding half the family sky, MaMa did an equally good job in supporting the family.

In portraying MaMa as a laboring wife and mother, Kingston presents her class theme very well. Transformed from an educated woman in old China to a

cheap laborer in America, MaMa bemoaned that "We're the slaves of these villagers who were nothing when they were in China. I've turned into the servant of a woman who can't read" (*China Men* 245). Once in a long while, MaMa "brings out the metal tube that holds her medical diploma" (*The Woman Warrior* 57). It must have been painful for her to think of her fall in social status when she performed the double duties in and outside the home, contending with both the prevailing ideology of Chinese American males at home and the racism of the larger American society.

Back in China, MaMa was an unconventional woman. Born in the Chinese patriarchal tradition where a woman's place was in the home, she was raised against such traditions. Her father taught her to read and write when she was a little girl. Education gave her the wisdom and courage to challenge the patriarchal tradition. On her wedding day, for example, she was wearing "a funeral white,"[11] much to the astonishment of her wedding guests because, in Chinese culture, red was the proper festive color for a wedding. On her wedding night, as another example, although the family reminded, "Be sure to make her bow her head," she leapt out of bed and sat facing her husband so closely that there was no room for her to kowtow[12] so that "the kowtowing-to-the-husband part of the ceremony was skipped" (32).

Kowtowing-to-the-husband, in Kingston's writing, represents a wife's obedience to her husband. Kingston challenges patriarchy by portraying MaMa as resistant to such ideology. She portrays wives of other immigrant men as defiant against patriarchy, too. For example, before their husbands left for the Gold Mountains, they exchanged stories to frighten one another. When men told about a

husband who smeared his cheating wife with honey and tied her naked on an ant hill, women told how there was once a queen, who, jealous of the king's next wife, had this other woman's arms and legs cut off and her eyes, tongue, and ears cut out (47). Women told such stories to challenge the practice that men and women were judged by different social/moral standards at the time. That is, while men could take more than one wife, women had to remain faithful to one husband. The story of women frightening their husbands shows that women demanded equal rights in regard to moral matters, which subverts the notion that Chinese women at the time served as slaves to their husbands.

Wives telling stories to warn their husbands is a discursive portrayal of women in China. Portraying women as defiant of patriarchal tradition, Kingston expresses Third World Feminist ideas against Western Feminist scholarship. As is mentioned in Chapter I, both Spivak and Mohanty question such scholarship. Spivak notes that "the historically muted subject of the subaltern woman, in particular, was inevitably consigned to being either misunderstood or misrepresented through the self-interest of those with the power to represent" (qtd. in Bahri 199). Mohanty critiques such "power to represent" because it defines women in the third world as "ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc." and "sexually constrained" ("Under Western Eyes" 337).

Kingston is not happy with such a definition and representation. She challenges the stereotypical images of Chinese women as passive and docile by portraying them as resistant in many ways. She demonstrates that with the absence

of men, Chinese immigrant women became "independent, controlling their own fate and giving voice to their own stories" (Goellnicht, "Tang Ao in America" 206). Such independence helped when they came to America. For example, MaMa, Brave Orchid (伟兰), stayed firm with the family and got over the difficult times. She was educated, talented, and gifted with story telling. Sensible enough to understand her family situation, she not only managed to soothe and scold her husband back to work, but also worked hard outside the home herself to keep the family going. She was strong enough to possess both female and male powers.

The portrayal of MaMa possessing both female and male powers is reflective of Postcolonial feminism in that female identity is constructed in her interaction with the globe rather than predetermined. In this regard, "Spivak and many other postcolonial and feminist critics alter [*sic*] us to the ways in which a subject position is constructed within discourse, rather than pre-existing discourse" (Bahri 207). True, Third World women often find their multiple identities in their interaction with the international world. In this interaction, according to Judith Butler, "identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (25). Butler means that gender is a performance. As a result, the binary view of gender relations, i.e. the two clear-cut groups of men and women no longer accounts for what is happening to women today. Kingston's portrayal of MaMa possessing both male and female powers is expressive of such poststructual feminist ideas.

True, MaMa performed different duties in different social contexts. While she was a privileged village doctor in China with a servant girl helping her, she

became the servant of those who could not read in America. And, while she was defiant of the Chinese tradition by refusing to kowtow to her husband at her wedding in China, she coped with her husband's sexist abuses in America when he lost his business. She was an understanding, tolerant, and caring wife. The way she dealt with her suffering from sexism proves that she was resourceful enough to understand and cope with the tough social/racial reality. Her gender role was, thus, determined by the social circumstances in which she had to demonstrate both her female power as a caring wife-mother, and male power as a physical laborer and bread winner, which means she performed double roles as she suffered doubly. Portraying MaMa as understanding and hardworking against adverse social conditions, Kingston challenges the Oriental stereotypes of Chinese women being docile and obedient slaves to their husbands. At the same time, she opposes the division between men and women by bridging gender differences, suggesting that women are not at all a group "characterized by common dependencies or powerlessness" (Mohanty, Under Western Eyes 340).

Resisting Emasculation and Reasserting Masculinity: Three Generations of Men in *China Men*

As was mentioned, *China Men* combines family history with historical facts and mythic stories. "The Laws" chapter presents historical facts about the legal injustices toward Chinese-Americans and the physical violence against them, while the family hi/stories concretize the Chinese-American experience of immigration and racism, and the myths foreground subtler aspects (e.g. emasculation, silence) of this

experience (Liu 2-3). In the first short chapter, "On Discovery," Kingston retells a mythic story of an early-nineteenth century Chinese novel, *Flowers in the Mirror*. In Kingston's version, Tang Ao was transformed into a woman in North America:

> Once upon a time, a man, named Tang Ao, looking for the Gold Mountain, crossed an ocean, and came upon the Land of Women.
>
> […]
>
> Some scholars say that that country was discovered during the reign of Empress Wu (A.D. 694-705),[13] and some say earlier than that, A.D. 441, and it was in North America. (3, 5)

In the Land of Women, as Kingston describes, Tang Ao was forced to have his feet bound, ears pierced, facial hair plucked, and lips painted. The old woman who did the job jokingly threatened to sew his lips together. The "men's country" of the Gold Mountain, the place men went to find fame and fortune, became the Land of Women, where a legalized racism turned "men" into "women." Cheung comments, "critics familiar with Chinese American history will readily see that the ignominy suffered by Tang Ao in a foreign land symbolizes the emasculation of China Men in the United States, where the peculiar racial discrimination suffered by them is often tied to an affront to their manhood" (*Articulate Silence* 104).

The Tang Ao legend foreshadows the effects of immigrant laws on China Men in the biographical sections. A serious effect of such laws is sexual deprivation. Kingston mythologizes the historical and political situation from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century America, during which time, according to Patti Duncan,

about fifty laws were passed to restrict and subordinate Asian immigrants (42). Kingston documents some of the laws in "The Laws" chapter. The first law to exclude Chinese immigration was enacted in 1882:

> 1882: the congress passed the first Chinese Exclusion Act. It banned the entrance of Chinese laborers, both skilled and unskilled, for ten years.
>
> …
>
> 1892: The Geary Act extended the 1882 Exclusion Act for another ten years. It also decreed that Chinese caught illegally in the United States be deported after one year of hard labor.
>
> …
>
> 1904: The Chinese Exclusion Acts were extended indefinitely, and made to cover Hawai'i and the Philippines as well as the Continental United States. (154, 155, 156)

More than two decades later, another law was enacted against immigration of Chinese women that further separated China Men from their families. The law also forbade marriage between white Americans and the Chinese:

> 1924: An Immigration Act passed by Congress specifically excluded "Chinese women, wives and prostitutes." Any American who married a Chinese woman lost his citizenship; any Chinese man who married an American woman caused her to lose her citizenship. (156)

Such laws stopped Chinese immigration and separated the Chinese immigrants from their families for several decades. As a result, "90% of early Chinese immigrants

were male," residing in the "bachelor societies" at that time. According to Cheung, "the first and probably the most painful [suffering] is sexual deprivation" (*Articulate Silences* 104). Over sixty years later in 1943, Congress repealed the Exclusion Act of 1882. And in 1946, the War Bride Act enacted a separate law allowing the wives and children of Chinese Americans to apply for entry as "non-quota immigrants" (157). Only then, Kingston writes, "did the ethnic Chinese population in the United States begin to approach the level of seventy years previous. (When the first Exclusion Act was passed in 1882, there were some 107,000 Chinese here; the Acts and the Driving Out steadily reduced the number to fewer than 70,000 in the 1920s)" (157).

"The Laws" chapter records the history of Chinese exclusion after China Men were recruited to work as cheap laborers. Lowe reviews such history, stating that "late-nineteenth century Chinese immigrants labored in mining, agriculture, and railroad construction but were excluded from citizenship and political participation in the state" (8). Beginning from the twentieth century, "restrictive and exclusionary laws instituted by the dominant white culture against the Chinese had emasculated these immigrant men, forcing them into 'feminine' subject positions of powerlessness and silence, into 'bachelor' Chinatowns devoid of women, and into 'feminized' jobs that could not be filled by women" (Goelllnicht 192). China Men were thus known as emasculated victims.

Kingston could not bear the stereotypes of China Men being emasculated. To reassert Chinese American masculinity, she tells stories of her forefathers to show

that they were not at all emasculated victims. She first portrays them as heroic, possessing physical/mental powers and achieving male feats in mining, agriculture and railroad construction. As single husbands, Great Grandfather and Grandfather emigrated to America with a strong sense of manhood. Bak Goong, for example, felt proud of his role as a bread winner: "A family man, he walked the entire way and reached town by noon. He went directly to the general store, where he bought a money order for his wife and dictated a letter about how well and lighthearted he was in this Sandalwood paradise" (106). Likewise, as Chua states, there is heroism in the Grandfather who helped tunnel and blast the Central Pacific railroad, who hung sky-high from wicker baskets to place powder charges (53). Grandfather felt proud of his physical strength and claimed that "The pale, thin Chinese scholars and the rich men fat like Buddhas were less beautiful, less manly than these brown muscular railroad men, of whom he was one" (*China Men* 142). In one of the final short chapters, "The Hundred Year Old Man," in addition, Kingston attributes health and longevity to physical labor. The old man was interviewed by reporters:

> "In one hundred and six years, what has given you the most joy?" the reporters asked him.
>
> He thought it over. He said, "What I like best is to work in a cane field when the young green plants are just growing up." (306)

The "physical exploitation of Chinese-Americans is thus turned first into a means to strengthen them physically and then into one of pleasure" (Liu 9). Kingston thus reasserts China Men's masculinity by empowering them with physical strength.

To reassert China Men's masculinity, secondly, Kingston empowers them with male potency. That is, she portrays them with strong sexual desires. Bak Goong linked the rule of silence to the silence of the Buddhist monk, which he then linked to the lack of sexual possibilities: "Apparently we've taken a vow of chastity too. Nothing but roosters in this flock" (*China Men* 100). As was mentioned earlier in the chapter, Bak Goong organized a shout party: they dug a hole in the ground and told the earth their secrets: "Hello down there in China!" "Hello, Mother. Hello, my heart and my liver" (117). My "heart and liver" (心肝宝贝) is the Chinese way of saying "my sweetheart." The shout party, on the surface, tells how much they missed their families. In a deeper sense, as Cheung comments, this "oral penetration — he literally pounds away at the earth" is depicted as "an act of survival and potent imagination, the coupling of genital imagery and the rhetoric of conquest" (109).

Kingston depicts Ah Goong, Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, with a fabulous imagination, too. Ah Goong felt terribly homesick with no women to hug and comfort him during fearful nights. Watching the stars one night, he "felt his heart breaking of loneliness" at the thought that "the railroad he was building would not lead him to his family" (*China Men* 129). He recognized the constellations from China …, the Spinning Girl and Cowboy, far, far apart. One deep night,

> He jumped out of his bedroll. "Look! Look!" Other men jumped awake. An accident? An avalanche? Injun demons? "The stars," he said. "The stars are here." … "There. And there," said Ah Goong, two

> hands pointing. "The Spinning Girl and the Cowboy. Don't you see them?" (129)

The stars he called out for were the Spinning Girl and Cowboy (牛郎织女) in a Chinese legend. The legend tells of a heavenly girl who fell in love with an earthly boy who were both transformed into stars and allowed by the Queen of the Sky to meet across the bridge of the Milky Way only once a year. This well-known legend is still used today to refer to a husband and wife that are separated from each other. Kingston uses this legend to expose the cruelty of immigrant laws that separated China Men from their wives, thus deprived them of their sexual life.

Elaine Kim comments that China Men "are victimized and kept womanless but they are never emasculated victims" (209). Instead, they are empowered with male potency. Like Bak Goong, Ah Goong did not spend his money on prostitutes. And like Bak Goong, he fulfilled his sexual desires with a fabulous imagination: "he took out his penis under his blanket or bared it in the woods and thought about nurses and princesses. He also just looked at it, wondering what it was that it was for, what a man was for, what he had to have a penis for" (*China Men* 144). On one occasion, lowered in a wicker basket and seized by sexual desire, Ah Goong masturbates in the open air:

> One beautiful day, dangling in the sun above a new valley, not the desire to urinate but sexual desire clutched him so hard he bent over in the basket. He curled up, overcome by beauty and fear, which shot to his penis. He tried to rub himself calm. Suddenly he stood up tall and squirted out into

> space. "I am fucking the world," he said. The world's vagina was big, big as the sky, big as a valley. He grew a habit: whenever he was lowered into the basket, his blood rushed to his penis, and he fucked the world. (133)

The act of Grandfather "fucking the world" startles many readers. Yet, Julia Lisella comments that "what is crucial in this passage is the 'sexual desire' that cannot be taken away by any regime or immigration system" (54). Such an act, as Tomo Hattori comments, "allows Ah Goong to identify with a masculine sexuality that is not limited by his economic station as a Chinese railroad worker" (216). In this sense, we can read "fucking" as a form of male liberation, a form of mastery of the white power structure in terms of white male power over Chinese male laborers. Because, up there in the basket, Ah Goong is free of his bosses and in charge of his own body. Kingston thus illustrates that "body politics is a male as well as female issue, especially under the harsh conditions of an exploitive capitalist enterprise" (Lisella 65). Cheung comments that "Ah Goong's defiant act of impregnating the world underscores both the insufferable deprivation of China Men and their strategies of survival through grandiose imagination" (*Articulate Silences* 104). Empowering the grandfathers with male potency, Kingston "reconstructs their gorgeous physicality and sexuality, their longings for the company of Chinese men, women, families and ethnic communities" (Ho 198). What's more, she rewrites Chinese American history by demonstrating that China Men are not emasculated victims.

Kingston reasserts the masculinity of Chinese immigrants of the first half of

the twentieth century in their physicality and imaginative sexuality, too. In those years, as the economy changed, China Men were no longer working in labor camps. They started their restaurant or laundry business and were thought to be feminized for having to do women's jobs. To challenge such stereotypes, Kingston portrays BaBa as sexually attractive: "Baba refashions himself as 'Ed' (after Thomas Edison, the inventor), a modern man, literally and vainly 'well suited' to be part of the glitter dust of the 1920s Jazz Age in New York, when men lusted after the Gatsbian green light of romantic possibility in the American Dream" (Ho 202). In "The Father from China" chapter, Ed and his three laundry friends sought the expensive company of white dancing girls on weekends to allay sexual loneliness. They enjoyed their freedom, feeling that "The Gold Mountain was indeed free: no manners, no traditions, no wives" (*China Men* 61). Kingston writes:

> On Saturday Ed and Woodrow went to Fifth Avenue to shop for clothes. With his work pants, Ed wore his best dress shirt, a silk tie, gray silk socks, good leather shoes with pointed toes, and a straw hat. […] The two of them strolled Fifth Avenue and caught sight of themselves in windows and hubcaps. They looked all the same Americans. (63, 64)

One afternoon, after Ed's laundry partners trimmed one another's hair with their barber's shears and electric hair clippers in Ed's professional style, parted in the middle, the four gentlemen went to a tearoom and danced with blonde girls:

> They danced until they had no more tickets. And they danced with as many different blonds as they pleased. And Ed was so handsome that

> some danced with him for free, vied with one another to dance with him. He became bold enough to ask the friendliest one who had been studying his eyes, his high cheekbones, and neat nose, who had made him unbutton his sleeve and hold his tan arm against her pink arm, "You like come home with me? Please?"
>
> "No, honey," she said. "No." (66)

This portrayal of BaBa and his laundry men dancing with blonde girls and inviting them home shows, on the one hand, that they possessed and expressed their sexual desires. On the other hand, the girls' saying "No" to their invitation shows that they could not enjoy the kind of freedom in the sense they dreamed. This "juxtaposition of the Chinese and American romances exposes Ed's carefree interlude in New York for what it is: a fool's paradise" where their dreams of freedom captivated them (Cheung, *Articulate Silences* 107).

Such a captivating dream is told again in a short chapter, "The Ghostmate," in which Kingston tells the legend of a young man who found shelter in the woods during a rain storm. There, in her big house, the "most beautiful woman he has ever seen" gave him food, clothing, and materials for his art (75). She promised to show him how to improve his work and make a lot of money. In return, the woman wanted his art: "I love this scroll. Let me have it. Don't sell it." "And these shoes." She says, "I love this cup, its lines, its design, its handle. Let me keep it," pulling things out of his pack (79-80). To obtain these, the woman talked about love and offered sex, reminding him "how unwifely her breasts and thighs are, how

helpless her body works as he touches it" (80). Wandering like a ghost on his way home, the young man remembered "a beautiful lady he met in a previous incarnation or a dream last night" (81). The young man's story is analogous of Chinese immigrants, who were desired for their skills and labor. Their romance with women, however, was nothing but a dream.

The young man's story is symbolic of the nightmarish side of China Men's dream in the Land of Women, where they were seduced with a spell. Just as the beautiful lady in the Ghostmate chapter exerted such a strong spell over the young man that he could not help but stop to visit her on his way home, Chinese immigrants were attracted to the Gold Mountain for its riches and found it hard to return to their homelands. Also, like the young man who was unable to "remain joined, connected" to the woman (80), Chinese immigrants, like strangers from a different shore, were excluded from citizenship and ownership of property. Kingston ends the Ghostmate chapter with "Fancy lovers never last" (81), to imply that the Land of Women was a fool's paradise in which China Men were included in the labor market but excluded from their right to stay. The mythic stories foreground such historical happenings.

Kingston claims China Men's masculinity by portraying them as physically strong and sexually attractive. By reasserting male energy, Kingston presents the struggles of China Men in heroic terms. Her heroic portrayal, however, is different from the heroic tradition in which "men who have been historically subjugated are all the more tempted to adopt a militant stance to manifest their masculinity" (Cheung 244). In the last two decades, some Chinese American men such as the editors of

Aiiieeeee! and *The Big Aiiieeeee!* have begun to correct the distorted images of Asian males projected by the dominant culture. In their attempt to eradicate effeminate stereotypes, the editors seem to be determined to show that Chinese and Japanese Americans have a heroic or militant heritage. They appeal to war heroes in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* to convey to the American public that Chinese culture also has its Robin Hood and John Wayne — a Hollywood film star, an enduring America icon, known for his image of traditional masculinity — like the mainstream culture and literature. Asian American women writers and scholars are reassessing the entire Western code of heroism. They reconstruct Chinese American masculinity in different ways from the *Aiiieeeee!* editors.

In *China Men*, apart from exhibiting traditional Chinese masculine traits such as physical strength and responsibility for the family, Kingston portrays China Men as intelligent and resourceful people as well. Commenting on *China Men*, Goellnicht states that "'feminine' strategies of subversion from the periphery, from positions of apparent powerlessness — 'the skill of …deceits' (60) — are the very ones that brought success to the forefathers in their times of oppression" ("Tang Ao in America" 204). Bak Goong, for example, disguised his words in singing and coughing. Ah Goong fantasized with "nurses and princesses" (*China Men* 144). His "fucking the world," in Lissela's analysis, "stands for male energy, rather than male heroics" (65). Such male energy, though shocking, is more impressive than conventionally presented male heroics such as "loyalty, revenge, and individual honor as the overriding ethos" (Cheung, "The Woman Warrior Versus the Chinaman

Pacific" 242). This new way of presenting manhood reveals the psychological and sexual frustration of China Men caused by exclusionary laws. At the same time, it serves effectively in reasserting China Men's masculinity.

Unfortunately, "the ability to perform violent acts implied in the concepts of warrior and epic hero is still all too often mistaken for manly courage; and men who have been historically subjugated are all the more tempted to adopt a militant stance to manifest their masculinity" (Cheung, "The Woman Warrior Versus the Chinaman Pacific" 244). Kingston is offering a discursive model of manhood in her writing because she was a pacifist, fighting for world peace. Cheung supports such a model of manhood by favoring alternative models in Chinese strategists such as Zhou Yu[14] (周瑜) and Zhuge Liang,[15] (诸葛亮) who were more talented and resourceful people than war heroes. Zhou Yu and Zhuge Liang defeated their enemies by mental strategies rather than physical combat. The thirty-six stratagems[16] (三十六计) employed by Zhuge Liang during the Three Kingdoms era are still well-known today as a valuable part of the Chinese cultural legacy. Kingston reconstructs Chinese American masculinity by portraying her forefathers as resourceful people who used strategies for survival. She challenges the Western heroic literary tradition mimicked and advocated by the *Aiiieeeee!* editors. In doing so, she expresses her pacifist ideas at the same time. She declares: "I don't like warriors…. I guess I always have in my style a doubt about wars as a way of solving things" (qtd. in Cheung 243). Kingston's commitment to pacifism is significant in the current world in which there are still wars between countries and regions. In her special way,

Kingston challenges the traditional sense of manhood and offers a new way of understanding and interpreting masculinity.

Resisting Sexism and Recovering China Men's Manhood: Daughter-Narrator in *China Men*

Like Geollnicht, Cheung argues that men of color who have been abused in white society are often tempted to restore their sense of masculinity by venting their anger and self-hatred at those who are even more powerless – the women and children in their families (*Articulate Silences* 108). This is true of BaBa in *China Men.* Having been turned into feminine subject positions in America, BaBa lapses into silence, "breaking that silence only to utter curses against women as a means of releasing his sense of frustration and powerlessness in racist America" (Geollnicht, "Tang Ao in America" 201). Kingston describes her father's anger in *China Men*:

> You were angry. You scared us. Every day we listened to you swear, "Dog vomit. Your mother's cunt. Your mother's smelly cunt." You slammed the iron on the shirt while muttering, "Stink pig. Mother's cunt." Obscenities. […] Worse than the swearing and the nightly screams were your silences when you punished us by not talking. You rendered us invisible, gone. (12, 14)

The daughter-narrator Maxine was angry at her father's sexist behavior although she understood that it was to support the family that he had to endure physical labor. In exposing racism in America that subjugated China Men, Kingston, unlike her mother, does not remain silent about sexism in the home and in the Chinese American

community. Goellnicht indicates that "she uses her marginal vantage point, not only to critique the racist mainstream for its treatment of her forefathers but also to avenge herself on those very forefathers, the malestream, for their sexist treatment of Chinese women" (203). In this way, the text emerges as both an act of compassion towards the father and a challenge to his sense of manhood.

To challenge BaBa's sense of manhood, Kingston "indicts her father's sexism in the family, its way of replicating patriarchal violence in physical, emotional, and social terms" (Ho 200). In doing so, she exposes the ugliness of her father's behavior without reservations. For example, she describes her father's anger when she and her younger sisters "goaded him, irked him—*gikked* him" on one occasion during his mental depression:

> He chased my sister, who locked herself in a bedroom. "Come out," he shouted. But of course, she wouldn't, he having a coat hanger in hand and angry. I watched him kick the door; the round mirror fell off the wall and crashed. The door broke open, and he beat her. Only, my sister remembers that it was she who watched my father's shoe against the door and the mirror outside fall, and I who was beaten. (253)

Telling such stories about BaBa, Kingston not only avenges her father for his abusive behavior, but more important, she suggests that Chinese American men "must reject the traditional Eastern/Western models of manhood that link masculinity with violence, racism, and sexism" (Ho 206). Part of Kingston's work, therefore, is to "assess the damage" of sexism, to articulate the emotional and social struggles which

seriously strain a family and ethnic community (Ho 204). BaBa came from a patriarchal tradition in which women were regarded as inferior and subordinate to their husbands. Coming to America, BaBa did not give up such ideas. Having failed a couple of times in business, he became disillusioned about his ability to maintain a traditional notion of manhood. He turned his anger to the women in the home in his depressed state of mind. Yet, unlike *The Woman Warrior*, in which the author presents the conflicts and reconciliation between mother and daughter, in *China Men*, she goes beyond the father-daughter relationship. To Kingston, Father's abusive practices must be critiqued as part of the recovery of a more liberating notion of manhood.

To recover a liberating notion of manhood in Chinese America, Kingston tells both heroic and loving stories of her forefathers. There is the story of a caring Great Grandfather, who sent his family his monthly wage with a sense of humor, bragging about his success: he "dictated a letter about how well and lighthearted he was in this Sandalwood paradise" (106). There is the story of the railroad grandfather as a loving husband who brought his wife a gold ring made from one bag of gold that he sifted — another example of Grandpa being cheated: the goldsmith said that his gold was not pure. Telling loving stories about her forefathers, Kingston has constructed a new Chinese American masculinity. That is, men can be heroic and loving at the same time. They are not complete stories, but fragments of men's stories recovered and retold by women, mostly by Kingston's mother. The "talk-stories" about fathers are a source of empowerment for Chinese American women in their struggle against

racism in society and sexism at home. These stories "enact the power of women in making and remaking culture" (Ho 201).

To counter sexism in Chinese America, Kingston also tells stories about her two grandfathers in China. The maternal grandfather, for example, was "an unusual man in that he valued girls; he taught all his girls how to read and write" (30). The paternal grandfather, Ah Goong, too, valued girls. He desired a daughter so much that he traded his youngest son, Maxine's father, for a girl in the neighborhood. It was, of course, idiotic and crazy of him to choose a girl over a boy, especially one who Grandma thought had the potential to be a scholar. Stopped by his powerful wife, Ah Goong went so crazy that he began "taking his penis out at the dinner table, worrying it, wondering at it, asking why it had given him four sons and no daughter, chastising it, asking it whether it were yet capable of producing the daughter of his dreams" (21). The stories about grandfathers in China are ironical because they were not sexist like the father in America. Such family history, as Ho comments, "subverts the patriarchal valorization of boys in China…." It also "subverts the notion that all Chinese men are sexist and incapable of transgressing patriarchal values and norms" (200).

Exposing her father's abusive behaviors, however, Kingston shows a good understanding that the racist society turned him into a sexist. Therefore, Kingston addresses her father not simply as an exploited worker of white patriarchal capitalism. She honors him as a successful business owner as well. She tells "the persevering heroic story of her father, who, swindled out of a partnership in a New York laundry

and exploited mercilessly by a casino owner, still managed to establish his laundry in Stockton, California (Chua 53). Kingston understands him as a man who knows the brutalizing effects of survival in this country, and the importance of the support of his wife and children. She, therefore, restores his heroism by reflecting his experience from a defeated laborer to a successful business owner.

Understanding that the tough social reality turned BaBa into sexism and silence, Kingston also restores his love and humor. There was a time when he was lighthearted, loving, and caring: he explained to his wife the little English he knew, showed his sons some *gongfu* tricks — Chinese martial arts also known as *Wushu*, and made paper planes and played with his daughters. Kingston recounts that her parents crowded into a child's cot playing Vietnamese refugees under a blanket tent. The child's cot served as "the boat" that Vietnamese immigrants used to flee from Vietnam to the United States after the end of the Vietnam War. Such memories demonstrate Father's good sense of humor. Kingston feels a strong need to regain his voice, too. To do this, she honors him as a poet-scholar (书生) in his American transformation. In China, Father was a scholar. At his one-month birthday party,[17] his mother gave him the Four Valuable Things (文房四宝)[18] — ink, inkslab, paper, and brush (纸墨笔砚),[19] which promised education and indicated his promise as a scholar. Coming to America, the poet-scholar became a toilsome laundry man who was mute: "No stories. No past. No China" (*China Men* 14). In seeking a talking cure that will challenge her silent father to respond to the anger and love of a daughter, the daughter-narrator engages in a conversation with him: "I will tell you

what I suppose from your silence and few words, and you can tell me that I'm mistaken. You'll just have to speak up with the real stories if I've got you wrong" (15). Such a conversation with him is "an *invitation* to her father to critical reflection and enactment of more radical social change" (Ho 205). Father did respond to the daughter's invitation. In an interview Kingston indicates: "his answering me in poetic form is an ancient tradition. The ancient poets would write poetry back and forth to each other. […] And so my father and I communicated the way ancient scholars and poets did" (qtd. in Ho 205). Kingston publicly honors their special communication. She put his annotated copy of *China Men* in a museum exhibition of her work: "The Chinese translation of *China Men* has wide margins on each page, and my father wrote commentary in his copy.[20] He did it in *Woman Warrior*, too…" (206). Kingston restores her father's voice in the written communication between them.

The written communication between father and daughter proves that Father is an educated scholar with poetic talents. However, his inability to speak the English language prevents him from using his verbal and mental powers. What he needs now to be a complete being is to tell his-story, the very gift his daughter is giving him in this text of her fantasies, her imagination, her fabulations (Goellnicht 205). Telling his stories, the daughter-narrator regains her father's voice and reasserts his masculinity. In fact, "he does not need a restoration of his phallic power: the filial attendance of his children and the attentions of Brave Orchid [his wife] demonstrate his 'masculinity.' Furthermore, he has the traditional Confucian solution to securing

a place in society: procreation, family endurance and 'the making of more Americans'" (Goellnicht 205). Resisting sexism, Kingston not only reclaims China Men's heroism but also recovers their manhood in a modern sense.

Bridging Races, Cultures, and Nations: The Brother in Vietnam

The Dragon Boat Day is a traditional holiday which is observed on the fifth day of May on the Chinese Lunar Calendar to commemorate a famous ancient poet and patriot Qu Yuan (Ch'ü Yüan 屈原). Qu Yuan served in the Chu government more than two thousand years ago when China was divided into separate states. For the peace of his state, Qu Yuan warned the King against waging wars on neighboring states. The King, however, turned a deaf ear to him. Moreover, the King banished him for his unpopular opinion so that he wandered in exile for years. Disappointed and disgraced by the fall of his kingdom after the King fought a losing war, Qu Yuan drowned himself in a river. To honor him, people held dragon boat races and threw a kind of sticky rice into the river to feed his ghost. To stop the fish from eating the rice, they wrapped the rice in bamboo leaves. Known as *Zongzi* (粽子), the food has become a traditional holiday food that people eat on Dragon Boat Day.

Kingston tells the story of Qu Yuan in a short chapter called "The Li Sao: An Elegy," translated as *Sorrow after Departure*. In Kingston's version, Qu Yuan is portrayed as a poet, a patriot, and, a pacifist. Telling the Li Sao Elegy, Kingston explains: Ch' ü Yüan, "also called Ch' ü Ping, meaning 'Peace,' was banished" (256). The Qu Yuan story, which symbolizes not only Chinese immigrants' exile and

patriotic status, but also their pacifist ideology, is followed immediately by the brother chapter entitled "The Brother in Vietnam." The brother's experience in 1960s America draws many of Kingston's themes together. First, "an antiwar motif — countering also the policy lines of contemporary American governments — recurs throughout the book" (Cheung 119). Before he joined the war, the brother was teaching in a high school where he told his students some atrocities to convince them about the wrongness of the war. He told them that the "military draft is not an American tradition. Protest against it is a longer tradition" (*China Men* 285). His teaching makes his pacifist ideology clear.

Despite the fear that the war would destroy his beliefs and values, the brother nevertheless joined the war. The war experience enables Kingston to express her second theme: claiming America. Earlier in the grandfathers' chapters, Kingston claims America by presenting their contributions to building America. Now, she claims her brother's desire and right to be a U.S. citizen. Kingston explains the situation during the war years. The chances for him had narrowed to two: go to Canada or enlist in the Navy. The Brother decided against Canada because he did not want to live the rest of his life as a fugitive and an exile. The United States was the only country he had ever lived in and he would not be driven out. He wanted to "hold firm to his American identity, a birthright inherited from the toil and triumphs of his forebears" (Chua 54). Among the Army, Air Force and Navy, he chose the Navy. His logic was that in the Navy he would follow orders up to a point short of a direct kill. That is, he would not shoot a human being as he might have to in the

Army; he would not have to press the last button that dropped the bomb from the air. He would be a Pacifist in the Navy rather than in jail, no more or less guilty than the ordinary stay-at-home citizen of the war economy. Being enlisted, for him, became a way of being American.

Third, through her brother's war experience, Kingston expresses her race theme. The brother involved himself in a war that he dreaded and did not want to fight, tormented by the fact that "[t]hey'd send a gook to fight the gook war" (*China Men* 283). He had to go to war because he wanted to confirm his American identity. Unfortunately, he experienced racial discrimination even though he was an American citizen. The first few days in the Navy, for example, he was constantly harassed during training sessions by the company commander.

> Nobody called him chink or gook or slope or Commie. The only racial harassment was when the company commander stopped in front of him and hollered, "Where are you from?" and he had to shout out his hometown, Sir. "Louder. Where you from?" "Stockton, California. Sir." "Where is that?" "West coast, Sir." "What country?" "U.S.A., Sir." Every time the Chief shouted at him, it wasn't about his shoe shine or his attitude but "Where you from?" (286)

This was ridiculous because the commander either refused to believe that he was a U.S. citizen or distrusted him as he was not white.

The brother encountered such distrust in school, too, where his ideas were not taken seriously by his students. When he asked his class what steps they could take

to stop the war in Vietnam, the students replied, "'That is a communist question.' 'You think like that because you're a Communist.' Any criticism the brother had of America his students dismissed as his being gookish" (279). As Duncan comments, although "he is American, he is not entitled to the same privileges enjoyed by those who belong, including the privilege to critique the system" (70). In her exploration of the constructions of race and racialization in contemporary America, Kingston conveys that "Asians in America have always been perceived as outsiders, as strangers, and as guests" (Duncan 71). As Lowe argues, "Asian American, even as a citizen, continues to be located outside the cultural and racial boundaries of the nation" (6).

The brother experienced racism like his immigrant forefathers but in different ways. He was the school teacher his grandfathers could not be, but that ability to have a profession, to move him out of the laboring class, does not guarantee him any special privileges in America (Lisella 67). His service in the Navy proves that he was trying to do his duty as an American citizen. However, he was not regarded as American. When he was recruited to teach the young men aboard the Navy ship how to read and write, as another example, the boys complimented him: "You speak English pretty good," to which he had figured out what to answer: "Thank you, so do you," but he was at a loss again. He did not feel like using sarcasm on these boys, nor would they understand it" (*China Men* 290). When he was promoted in the Navy, his Commanding Officer told him, "You've been run through a security check —" (298). Hearing that, the brother held his breath for fear of his family being

deported. Kingston writes, “The government was certifying that the family was really American, not precariously American but super American, extraordinarily secure — Q Clearance Americans” (299). The government had to make sure he was not un-American with divided loyalties and treasonous intentions.

The brother, ironically, realized his Americanness on his tour of duty in Korea and Taiwan because he felt less at home in a Taipei street than in the military base. He did not even feel at home in Hong Kong where his father’s hometown was close. When the Taiwanese asked him: “What are you?” he replied: “Chinese American” (296). Here, Kingston wants to claim his American identity as “Chinese American” without the hyphen. She once explained that “We ought to leave out the hyphen in ‘Chinese American,’ because the hyphen gives the word on either side equal weight.… Without the hyphen, ‘Chinese’ is an adjective and ‘American’ a noun; A Chinese American is a type of American” (qtd. in Cheung, “Re-Viewing Asian American Literary Studies” 6). Chua thinks that “Kingston is laying claim to the identity of Chinese as Americans whose centers of being are no longer even marginally in Asia” (55). Yet, meeting the people of his own race clarifies his identity as an ethnic Asian as well. This feeling was so strong that he was haunted by terrifying nightmares of himself walking among enemy corpses who became indistinguishable from his blood relatives in the Chinese American laundry: the faces of his own family, Chinese faces, Chinese eyes, noses, and cheekbones. The brother felt a bond with the people of his ancestry, which complemented the vision of Bak Goong who felt a bond with everyone and everything when he tried opium for

seasickness. The brother realized that to recognize a deep bond between the peoples of the world is "to undo the binary opposition between friends and enemies" (Cheung, *Articulate Silence* 120). His encounters with Asians, in this sense, helped him find his in-between identity and clarify his identity both as ethnic Asian and American. Through the brother, Kingston expresses her desire for world peace, for which she suggests bridging races, cultures, and nations. Such a dream is symbolically expressed in the brother's name Han Bridge which connects the Han people like the bridge between Han and here: "We are the Han people from the Han Dynasty"[21] (265). In this way, Kingston expresses one other theme: forging connections between Asia and Asian America. Kingston's last chapter, "The Young Men Who Listen," expresses her wish for young people to listen to the stories of China Men. Now she "could watch the young men who listen" (308). The implication is that the task of bridging Asia and Asian America involves putting faith in the future generation of Chinese Americans.

Summary

In this chapter of study on Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*, I have discussed how Great Grandfathers resisted the rule of silence in the sandalwood mountains; how Grandfathers did the most difficult job of building the transcontinental railroad; how Father got over business failures and established his own laundry business; how Mother suffered and resisted the double bind of colonial and national patriarchy, how China Men resisted emasculation, how Kingston

redefines China Men's masculinity; and how she expresses her desire for world peace. In the narration of all the characters and events that happened in Chinese American history, the race, class, and gender themes ran throughout the text. Kingston conveys that racism has been strong and China Men have resisted racism with various strategies. As China Men formed an exploited class in America as cheap laborers, their resistance to racism is also a resistance to class exploitation. The resistance against racial and economic oppression is witnessed in Great Grandfathers raising their voice against imposed silence, in Grandfathers going on a strike against unequal treatment/pay, in Father's perseverant struggle to become a business owner, and in Mother's taking double roles to help support the family and a lot more.

Telling the exploited history of the Chinese in America, Kingston represents the intersections of her race, class, and gender themes. Not only does she describe successfully the difficult jobs of her grandfathers working as cheap laborers in labor camps, but also she does a good job depicting the fall of her parents from the educated class in China to laundry workers and family servants in America for those who could not read. They managed to establish their own business for a better living for their children although neither could use their degrees and skills. Moreover, Kingston reveals that although capitalist development included China Men in cheap labor markets, Chinese exclusionary laws excluded them from their citizenship, from their right of property and from their right to enjoy married life.

Kingston presents gender in two primary ways: the emasculation of China Men in society and their sexism towards women at home. First, she demonstrates

how China Men were resistant to being emasculated while confined to male labor camps in the second half of the nineteenth century or in bachelor societies doing feminine kinds of jobs in the early twentieth century. The exploitation of China Men as cheap laborers in both periods is coupled with sexual deprivation. The resistance to sexual deprivation is witnessed in the struggles of the three generations of China Men. Telling their stories, Kingston challenges the Oriental stereotypes of them being feminized. Secondly, critiquing sexism, Kingston redefines China Men's masculinity by portraying them as heroic and loving in their struggle for survival. In doing so, she critiques the traditional models of manhood that link heroism with aggressiveness, violence, and sexism, and proposes a new model of manhood that connects masculinity with knowledge, resourcefulness, and tender feelings.

Kingston also expresses her disagreeable feelings about war via her brother's Viet Nam War experience, during which the brother confirmed his American identity and recognized his Chinese American identity. The dreams and nightmares of four generations of China Men show that they were subjugated because of their race, culture, and national origin. Nevertheless, they resisted racial, economic, and gender oppressions against their fate of being Asian, being poor, and being emasculated. Raising their voice, Kingston has reconstructed their cultural identities and rewritten Chinese American history. She shows that China Men are a heroic and resourceful people who have struggled persistently and, in various cases, triumphantly, to achieve their dreams.

Chapter III

THE DREAMS OF "THE MODEL MINORITY" FAMILY IN FAE MYENNE NG'S *BONE*

Introduction

This chapter discusses Fae Myenne Ng's first novel *Bone* (1993), in which Ng critiques the mainstream representation of the "model minority" family. According to Yungsuk Chae, "Model Minority" is a label that white American society has used to refer to Asian Americans for their "economic 'success' and achievement without any help from the government" (25). Viet Nguyen indicates that "The key themes of model minority — self-reliance versus government assistance, self-sacrifice versus self-interest, and quiet restraint versus vocal complaint in the face of perceived or actual injustice — can all be found in the mainstream literature as moments of conflict for the central characters" (148). Wendy Ho critiques such mainstream literature, arguing that "Ng counters the superficial and totalizing white mainstream representation of successful or model minority families, which often make invisible the suffering of poor, working class racial-ethnic groups" (210). Indeed, Ng draws attention to the underrepresented and poverty-stricken Chinese immigrants who are still struggling within the boundary of their ethnic communities. She conveys that they qualify as "model minority" only in the sense that they work hard. They have never achieved their dream of material success.

The history of the "model minority" dates to the second half of the nineteenth century. Iris Chang classifies Chinese immigration into three waves. Earlier Chinese

laborers who came to America to make their fortunes in 1949-era California gold rush and ended up laying track for the transcontinental railroad comprised the first wave of Chinese immigration (viii). Robert Lee refers to this big wave of Chinese workers who replaced the striking European and domestic laborers as a "'nineteenth century model minority,' — a 'middlemen' position that was ironically assigned by white domestic employers" (qtd. in Chae 22). They were the "model minority" to their employers because they worked as coolies, got lower wages, were "subservient" and "compliant," and were believed to be less likely than white workers to rebel against economic exploitation. In spite of such facts, the term "model minority" was not coined until the 1960s when sociologist William Peterson invented the term to describe Japanese and Chinese Americans (Chang 328, Fong 62). Two articles in national magazines praised the achievements of the two largest Asian American groups at that time. The first article, "Success Japanese-American Style," published in 1966 in *New York Times Magazine*, lauded Japanese Americans for overcoming harsh racial antagonism and internment to enter successfully into the American mainstream. In "Success Story of One Minority Group in the United States," Chinese Americans were also highly commended for their good behavior and economic success. Chae quotes from the 1966 *U.S. News and World Report* about the Chinese:

> At a time when Americans are awash in worry over the plight of racial minorities —[o]ne such minority, the nation's 300,000 Chinese Americans, is winning wealth and respect by dint of its own hard work. In any Chinatown from San Francisco to New York, you discover youngsters at

> grips with their studies. Crime and delinquency are found to be rather minor in scope. Still being taught in Chinatown is the old idea that people should depend on their own efforts — not a welfare check — in order to reach America's "promised land." … At a time when it is being proposed that hundreds of billions be spent to uplift Negroes and other minorities, the nation's 300,000 Chinese-Americans are moving ahead on their own — with no help from anyone else. (25-26)

The model minority praised in this news report refers to the new Chinese who came to the United States in the mid-twentieth century. A review of the literature indicates that a great many intellectual elites and their most intellectually capable and scientifically directed children emigrated to America because of the 1949 Communist revolution. According to Iris Chang, these intellectuals made up "the second major wave of Chinese coming to America" (ix). Peter Kwong calls this professional middle class "Uptown Asians" as opposed to the other group, the "Downtown Asians," the working class Asians, who lived in concentrated ethnic ghettos and suffered from all types of social problems (77). In American political history, as Chae notes, "the Immigration Act of 1965 has actually helped to form a racial and class stratification within minority communities, and the reform policy has brought a structural change" (29). Chae means that, apart from the migration of professionals, skilled laborers and students, recent Asian immigrants have mostly become small-business owners of groceries or ethnic restaurants, having brought capital to invest under the visa category of investors. The "model minority," in this sense, refers to an image of those middle

class Chinese as working hard, asking for little, and never complaining. They are thus called the "middle-class model minority" (Chae 24).

A third wave entered the United States during the last two decades of the twentieth century after Sino-American relations thawed (Chang x). The new immigrants were mostly relatives of U.S. citizens, investors, professionals or students, especially in the area of science and technology. They were perceived as the "modern day high-tech coolies" who worked hard to move upward into the American middle class, enjoying mostly material success (Chae 28). Chae states, however, that the pattern of acceptance and rejection of racial minorities has been repeated in U.S. history in that "despite the skilled or professional Asian immigrants being touted as a 'model minority,' they have actually faced racial discrimination in terms of wages and career opportunities" (28).

For these unpleasant reasons, "model minority" is a term that many Chinese now have mixed feelings about. Some, especially those upper middle class people who have "successfully" settled in the United States, interpret the ideology of a 'model minority' without question and regard it as an "honorable" label. Others, such as recent literary and cultural critics, who want to speak for the "Downtown Asians," think otherwise. Chae, for example, remarks in her 2008 study:

> The media depiction of Asian immigrants as a 'model minority' has concealed the racist reality and unequal power structure that have prevented minorities from improving themselves and also helped the U.S. to justify its myth as a 'land of promise,' which implies that everybody can make their

> wish come true depending on individuals' efforts, regardless of their race, gender, and class backgrounds. (26)

It is in this sense that Ng challenges the myth of immigrant success in her writing in which she foregrounds the tragic and painful stories of a working class family in the 1990s San Francisco Chinatown. The stereotypical images of Asian immigrants, who sacrifice their lives for the education of their children who become a "model" at school, are not found in Ng's *Bone*. Instead, "Men fail to keep promises and abandon their wives; wives commit adultery; fathers disown daughters, daughters commit suicide, have abortions, abscond to marry" (Ho 210). *Bone*, narrated by the eldest daughter, Leila, describes in flashback, and in no chronological sequence, the dilemmas and tensions confronted by her step-father, Leon Leong, her mother, Dulcie Fu, and her younger sister Nina, struggling to understand her middle sister Ona's suicide. The central question of the novel, the reason why Ona committed suicide, is not given. Thomas Kim thinks that in a novel where Leon fictively secures his identity, and all foundations are shown to be contingent, Ng will not provide the "reason" for Ona's suicide. Kim argues that the "difficulty of establishing accountability for Ona's death, arises from Ng's reluctance to name the originator of the injurious deed" (53). As a narrative technique, Ng has left the readers to decide who is to blame for Ona's death.

While refusing "to name the originator of the injurious deed," as Kim indicates, Ng does not stop investigating Ona's death. Leila, the daughter-narrator, tries her best to explain their situation: how her family is torn apart. Leon moves out, Nina flees to New York, leaving Leila caught between her mother and her boyfriend. Also, the

family is guilt-stricken. They blame themselves and each other for not having saved Ona. Leon and Dulci, the parents, employ the paradigm of "bad luck" based on their superstitious Chinese cultural beliefs. Leon blames himself for his failed promise to send Grandpa Leong's bones to China; Dulci blames herself for having an affair with her boss. She even blames Leila for sleeping with her boyfriend before they get married. Leila, on the other hand, blames her parents for giving Ona a hard time for going out with Osvaldo, the son of their deceitful business partner. She thinks that Ona "had to suffer the blame for Ong & Leong's failure" (139). She once yells at her parents: "You guys made her" (147). Leila also blames herself for being mean to Ona as an elder sister. Nina, the youngest daughter, however, "blamed us, this family. Everybody. Everything. Salmon Alley. The whole place" (51). In a word, Nina blames Chinatown.

Lisa Lowe points out that "San Francisco Chinatown, the site explored in *Bone*, emerged in the late nineteenth century in response to intense periods of anti-Chinese violence between 1870 and 1890 and the government's authorization of residential segregation in 1878" ("Discolonization, Displacement, Disidentification 121). In her exploration of "Chinatown space as a repository of layers of historical time, layers of functions, purposes, and spheres of activity" (122), Ng leads us to rethink whether the legal abolition of Chinese Exclusion in the mid 1940s has brought a significant difference to the lives of Asian immigrants. Chae argues that "there is not much change in the socially excluded and economically exploited living conditions of Asian immigrants" (78). Juliana Chang writes:

> Ng's inscription of the Leong/Fu family as "failed" (3) and incomplete does not represent the dysfunction of a single family unit; rather, this failed domesticity encrypts the failures of the nation and symptomatizes the continued exclusion of the Chinese American subject from the time and space of US nation-statehood. (114)

In spite of the fact that Ng is critiquing the continued exclusion of the Chinese American subject from the time and space of US nation-statehood, Vivian Chin thinks that Leila's story is not a 'universal' story but one that is specific to her place, time, race/ethnicity and economic class" (373). She means that Leila's story recounts a specifically Chinese American history and shows how the Leong family has been affected by specific personal and political conditions. Based on the ideas of Lowe, Chang and Chin, I argue that the racist and exploitative society is largely to blame for Ona's suicide. As a result, although the cause of Ona's suicide is not given, what has been happening to the family in more than fifty years of their family history makes sense to the readers. In this racist and exploitative society, as Donald Geollnicht indicates, "Ona becomes the embodiment of their American dream turned nightmare" ("Of Bones and Suicide" 319). I will, therefore, situate the tragedy of Leon's family in the Chinese American context and analyze Ona's suicide from a historical, social, and political point of view. I discuss, in separate sections, how Leila investigates Ona's death by telling the stories of her step-father, her mother, and her two sisters, and argue that the racist and exploitive society is largely to blame for Ona's death.

The Failed Promise of a "Paper Son": Leon and Grandpa Leong's Bones

Bone seems too short for the title of a novel. Yet, Ng says in an interview that "Bone seems to me the best metaphor for the enduring quality of the immigrant spirit. The book's title honors the old-timers' desire to have their bones sent back to China for proper burial" (118). The practice of returning bones to be buried in China carries much meaning in the Chinese tradition. The Chinese saying 落叶归根 — "falling leaves return to the root" — describes this part of the tradition. According to Chin, "such a tradition supports the belief that the remains of the immigrants belong with the ancestors in the 'true' home, which is the country of origin" (368). The "failure to be given a proper burial in the ancestral Chinese village can act as both a curse by the living against the dead and a threat by the dead against the living: 'if you don't bury me properly — in my ancestral home — then I will haunt and curse your existence in America'" (Geollnicht, "Of Bones and Suicide 307). As result, the failure to return the bones home for burial is a bad sign. Also, as the dead are believed to be homeless in the afterworld, such a failure also means that the living are not filial. Kingston reflects this part of the tradition in *China Men*: the railroad grandfathers express their last wish to have their bones sent to China for fear of being homeless.

In *Bone*, Grandpa Leong's bones serve as a reminder of Leon's failed promise to ship Grandpa's remains to China. Leon was a "paper son," who, like thousands of other Chinese immigrants, claimed a "paper identity" in order to pass through the Angel Island immigrant detention center. "Paper son" history dated to 1906 when a fire during the San Francisco earthquake destroyed much of the city, including its birth and

citizenship records. The loss of these municipal files allowed many immigrants to claim that they were born in San Francisco, thereby enabling them to establish U.S. citizenship. According to U.S. law, "the children of Americans were automatically citizens, even if they were born in a foreign country" (Lowe, "Discolonization, Displacement, Disidentification" 124). As a result, anyone who managed to convince the American government that he was a citizen tended to sell his legal paperwork to a young man eager to migrate to the United States. The young man then became a U.S. citizen (Iris Chang 145-46).

Leon entered the United States a year before the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1942 at age fifteen (but his false papers gave him a few more years). He became the "paper son" to his "paper father" by paying for his citizenship papers. Along with the payment "was the promise to send Grandpa Leong's bones back to China" (Ng 50). Leon's "paper son" history, as a result, extended earlier to Grandpa Leong "who came first to mine gold and then settled into farm work around the Valley" (84). Unlike other paper sons, Leon Leong never changed his name back to his real name, believing that, "In this country, paper is more precious than blood" (9). Retaining his "paper son" identity, moreover, he and his family treated Grandpa Leong like family. The children remembered the time they visited Grandpa: "We visited him when he worked on an alfalfa farm in Marysville, and there are pictures of all of us standing together in front of his wooden shack in the middle of the fields" (78). Mah cooked meals and took them to Grandpa Leong in a white pot (159). And, "it was Mah who found Grandpa Leong dead." […] "Mah had a hard time handling everything.

Grandpa Leong didn't have any savings, so she had to ask around for donations to pay for the casket and the burial clothes" (79). Leon was on a voyage so that he did not get to have Grandpa Leong's bones sent to China. This failed promise haunted him throughout his life: "Leon worried about the restless bones, and for years, whenever something went wrong — losing a job, losing the bid for the takeout joint, losing the Ong and Leong Laundry — Leon blamed the bones" (50).

And, Leon blamed the bones for Ona's death. Other members of the family blamed themselves, too. To understand her death, the family also turned towards official documents such as the police records detailing Ona's death. Yet, nothing could explain plausibly why Ona committed suicide. The question of legitimacy, according to Kim, "seems particularly pressing for Chinese immigrants, whose history (like that of other Asian Americans) is marked by legal, political, and geographical exclusions and demarcations" (42). From the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century in America, according to Patti Duncan, about fifty laws were passed to restrict and subordinate Asian immigrants (42). As a result, "Although the papers that Leon purchased at five thousand dollars from Leong allowed him to come to the United States, the legal identity of citizen in fact has not given Leon any social and economic security or stability" (Chae 79-80). Instead, Leon had to work hard to make a living: "Out at sea, on the ships, Leon worked in every room: Engine, Deck, and Navigation" (Ng 34). On land, between voyages as a merchant seaman, he worked odd jobs, but the work he found was unstable; he was frequently out of work. He was a fry cook, a barbeque chef, a janitor, a busboy, a night porter, a welder. In spite of his long hours

of temporary and low-paying jobs, he persisted. However, as a Chinese immigrant father and man in his search for stable work, he confronted rejection because of racial discrimination. It must be painful for the grown-up Leila to discover the rejection letters in Leon's suitcase years later:

> A rejection from the army: unfit.
>
> A job rejection: unskilled.
>
> An apartment: unavailable. (57)

More painful to Leila was that the good-humored Leon had made up stories "so that we could laugh, so that we could understand the rejections":

> The army wanted him but the war ended.
>
> He had job skills and experience: welding, construction and electrical work, but no English.
>
> The apartment was the right size but the wrong neighborhood. (58)

The piles of papers in his suitcase that documented Leon's history of daily degradation and rejection in this country basically said: "We Don't Want You" (57). These rejections, in essence, "track fifty years of life in a racist nation-state that perceives him as an outsider, and an illegal" (Ho 219). They showed that "the structured inequality in society has been inherited, and most immigrants have been economically constricted and their lives are still confined in ethnic enclaves" (Chae 83).

Being a hard-working immigrant father and man, however, Leon never gave up. Instead, he was a dreamer, a business schemer, "hoping to land that perfect job, find that perfect business" (Ng 55). He "talked about a Chinese takeout, a noodle

factory, many ideas" (34). Mah said of his big money talk: "Too much dreaming" (162). Ho indicates that "Leon, the dreamer father, is constantly reinventing his world in his big dreams and in his small-scale projects" (226), one of which was the L.L. Grocery. After he sold the store at a loss, he went into partnership with Luciano Ong. For a while, the laundry business gave him a sense of ownership and pride, and he felt that his American dream was finally coming true. As Leila recounts, Leon's business partnership was "the first real thing that looked promising, but then it went dangerously the other way" (Ng 34). That is, his partner Ong absconded with the money. Just as Kingston's father's first business was established on a "spoken partnership," and his second on a false ownership, Leon's business partnership was also established on old-world trust: "Leon and Luc had only shaken hands on the deal. There was no contract, no legal partnership" (170).

After the business failure, Leon turned his anger at his daughter Ona. He did not allow her to date Luk Ong's son: "I forbid you to see that mongrel boy. Crooked father, crooked son" (172). When Ona told Leon that she loved Osvaldo, he threatened to disown her. One evening, he locked her out; one other evening, everything blew up. Leon grabbed at Ona in Osvaldo's car and was yelling at her in Chinese. Mah started yelling, too. Ona's screams filled the entire alley.

Such facts reveal Leon's misunderstanding of not only his business failure, but also his daughter's needs so that he was penalizing his daughter for his failure. He was also blaming everyone and everything for the tragedy:

> Finally he blamed all of America for making big promises and breaking

> everyone. Where was his good job he'd heard about as a young man? Where was the successful business? He had kept his end of the bargain: he'd worked hard. Two jobs, three. Day and night. Overtime. Assistant presser. Prep cook. Busboy. Waiter. Porter. But where was his happiness? "America," he panted, "this lie of a country!" (103)

Leon felt disillusioned with the American Dream. Like Grandpa Leon's life story, which began with success in gold mining and farming but ended in failure, so was Leon's. His family lived in poverty no matter how hard he worked. Leila describes their life among other Chinatown families:

> Being inside their cramped apartment depressed me. I'm reminded that we've lived like that, too. The sewing machine next to the television, the rice bowls stacked on the table, the roll-up blankets pushed to one side of the sofa. Cardboard boxes everywhere, rearranged and used as stools or tables or homework desks. The money talk at dinnertime, the list of things they don't know or can't figure out. Cluttered rooms. Bare lives. Every day I'm reminded nothing's changed about making a life or raising kids. Everything is hard. (17)

Much more torturing to Leon was the fact that his daughter Ona committed suicide. Leon could not understand it: "She is my daughter, I'm her father. Why wouldn't she tell her father if something was wrong? […] Jumping off a building, I just cannot believe it. That no-good Ong boy must have something to do with it" (147). In his more self-critical moments, he blamed himself for the broken promise to send Grandpa

Leong's bones back to China.

There is, of courses, no reason why the bones are to blame. Ona's suicide was her own way of escaping from the deadlocked situation after her father's failure in business. Leon assigned the blame to Luciano as an untruthful partner, which revealed the aspect of ethnic conflict occurring in ethnic communities. However, Ng presents the conflict in a broader social, economic and political context (Chae 84). In her depiction of the Leong family's struggle against hostile social conditions, she shows that although "this society is wounded from within," the threat to Chinese American community is the result of the dominant culture's political, social, economic, and legal racism (Geollnicht 318).

The "Fallen Woman": Mah in a "Marriage of Toil"

Leila, the daughter narrator, says of her parents: "Mah's and Leon's lives were on high fire. They both worked too hard; it was as if their marriage was a marriage of toil — of toiling together" (33). With much sympathy, Leila tells the sad story of Mah in her marriage of toil:

> The old way. Matches were made, strangers were wedded, and that was fate. Marriage was for survival. Men were scarce: dead from the wars, or working abroad as sojourners. As such, my father Lyman Fu, was considered a prince. Mah married my father to escape the war-torn villages, and when he ran off on her, she married Leon to be saved from disgrace.

> Saved to work. Mah sat down at her Singer with the dinner rice still in her mouth. When we pulled down the Murphy bed, she was still there, sewing. The hot lamp made all the stitches blur together; the street noises stopped long before she did. And in the morning, long before any of us awoke, she was already there, at work. (34)

Once every season, Mah brought home her sewing to finish in the evenings as she was paid by piece. In a dual-wage earner household in which both husband and wife worked, their daughters were also urged to help. Lowe comments that the "private" space of the home as a "workplace" prioritized the relations of production over Chinese family relations ("Discolonization, Displacement, Disidentification 119). Ng portrays how unhealthy living/working conditions and Mah's seamstress sewing work under subcontracting had slowly destroyed her body: "Her neck softened. Her shoulders grew heavy. Work was her whole life, and every forward stitch marked time passing […] under the stamping needle" (Ng 163). Chae states that "Mah's physical change through her long years of sewing reflects an aspect of overexploitation of female laborers under subcontracting" (85). As the sewing lady accused, "Tommie [the contractor of the sweatshop] had everyone working overtime; he had to deliver the linen dresses before the new year" (Ng 105). Chae indicates that "Contractors, in a way, play a role as middlemen who exploit the labor of their own ethnic groups while supporting the larger economy of the society." As a renewed form of exploitation and a way to prevent labor organization, "subcontracting has provided flexibility and more profit to U.S. capitalists" (85).

Ng's description of Mah working under a subcontracting system in which the sewing women were paid by piece exposes not simply the excessive labor in Chinatown factories. Rather, her "exploitable status as a racialized immigrant worker, translates into a substantial savings for US and transnational capital" (Juliana Chang 126). Lowe says that the "policy of paying the worker by piece exploits the women in ways that extend beyond the extraction of surplus value from the hourly low-waged factory labor" ("Discolonization, Displacement, Disidentification" 118-19). Also, the incentive to complete as many pieces as possible ensures that the sewing women will work overtime without compensation and will make the home an additional site of labor. Ho thinks:

> Ng recovers the physical and psychosocial sites of trauma, of entrapped immigrant workers exploited by co-ethnic bosses within the Chinatown garment sweatshops and homes. She charts as well their exploitation by wealthy multinational American companies who benefit from the cheap wages and substandard conditions cultivated in competitive, profit- and time-driven capitalist labor economy. (214)

Yet, how much did Mah benefit from working under the exploitive capitalist system? As a wife/mother, Mah's major concern was the well being of her family. It is pitiful that she worked hard all her life but still lost one of her daughters, after which she lived "with the ghost, the guilt" (Ng 15). To help her recover, Nina, the youngest daughter, arranged for her to leave Chinatown for a while. Leila expresses her sympathy before her trip to Hong Kong:

> I felt for Mah; I felt her shame and regret, to go back for solace and comfort,

> instead of offering banquets and stories of the good life. Twenty-five years in the land of gold and good fortune, and then she returned to tell her story: the years spent in sweatshops, the prince of the Gold Mountain turned into a toad, and three daughters: one unmarried, another who-cares-where, one dead. I could hear the hushed tone of their questions: "Why? What happened? Too sad!" (24)

Mah's story was sad. In the land of opportunity where most other Chinese immigrants claimed material wealth to be their dreams, Mah seemed less dreamy in material aspects. All she dreamed of was love and peace, which she expressed in her daughter's name:

> Leon was out at sea when Ona was born, so Mah named her herself. But Mah was thinking of Leon when she picked the name Ona. Leon/Ona. *On* was part of Leon's Chinese name, too. It means "peace" in our dialect. Mah said it seemed respectful as well as hopeful. Leon was her new man and Ona was their new baby. (131)

Instead of finding peace, Ona jumped from the Nam, one of the city's housing projects. The full name of the building is *Nam Ping Yuen*. *Nam* means south, and *Ping Yuen* is something like "peaceful gardens" (14). Like *on* (安-peace) in Leon's and Ona's names, *ping* (平) also means peace. Ona, however, "jumped off the M floor of the Nam" (14). Leila "kept asking why Ona chose the thirteenth floor" (123).

After Ona jumped, Mah blamed herself for what happened, for "the bad choices she made. My father, Lyman Fu. Her affair with Tommie Hom. She thought all

the bad luck started with her" (51). Mah's first marriage with Lyman turned out a failure. She told Leila: "In those days, we did not have a choice. I was young and he picked me" (186). After she married Lyman, she went with him to Hong Kong where they had a few good years: "… ate well, dressed well. There was a motorcar" (187). But, all of a sudden, he lost all his fortune at a gambling table. After that, Mah told Leila, Lyman decided that America, the big gold mountain, was where he wanted to settle. They came to San Francisco together, but things did not work out the way he wanted. When he heard about Australia, "a new gold mountain, every coolie's dream," he decided to go to Australia. "A few years is all I need," he said. "I'll send for you," he promised (187).

Mah believed what her husband said. She thought that the child growing in her belly was insurance. Yet, he never sent for them. Abandoned with a child, Mah felt miserable. She cried and threatened: "Death. I will jump from the Golden Gate. Take this child, this no-good child." Her cries, Leila later understands, "told the whole story: the runaway husband, the child, the shame in her face" (188). Mah had to face the shame bestowed upon her from Chinatown. In traditional Chinese culture, it was a disgrace for a wife, especially with a child, to be abandoned by her husband. Mah was, therefore, obsessed with the desire to redeem herself from her "fallen-woman's status" (Chang 123). She decided to marry again to be saved from disgrace.

Mah married Leon also for two practical reasons: first, "for the green card" (Ng 182); second, for his absence at sea as a merchant seaman. She explained to the six-year-old Leila: "He'll be away a lot. It'll just be you and me. Like now" (184).

Marrying Leon for the green card, Mah was "presumably saved from being deported back to the harsh conditions of the Third World" (Juliana Chang 125). Her obsession with the green card exposes the fact that even though changes in immigrant laws at the time permitted the entry of Chinese women in substantial numbers, women like Mah still lived in fear of being deported. Marriage, for her, was the only way of maintaining her immigrant status. Marrying somebody, however, she had to consider the well-being of her child. She thought that Leon's absence as a merchant seaman would give her a better sense of control over life with her child. It turned out, however, that accepting such a household arrangement did not make her life easier. Instead, Mah found it difficult to handle things by herself on various occasions. One Saturday, before Grandpa Leong's funeral, she broke down. That day, Mah was worried about whether Leon was going to get home in time for the funeral and, being stressful, she was seen publicly flying into Tommie's arms. The daughter-narrator Leila understands that "there was more to it than just finding Grandpa Leong [dead]. It had to do with Leon being gone so much, it had to do with the monotony of her own life." Leila understood: "It wasn't just death that upset Mah, it was life, too" (Ng 82).

Marrying Leon, Mah expected "to be saved from disgrace" as a fallen woman from her first marriage (34). Instead, her affair with Tommie Hom added to her disgrace. Leila describes Chinatown gossip: "Wives had told their husbands, who told their park-bench buddies, who told the Newspaper Man, who kept on telling till it was old news." So when someone went up to Leon and said, "*Wey*, Leon, you're wearing a green hat" (156),[22] Leon disappeared from home without a goodbye note. He "was

sleeping on the sofas of the family-association office, on the long bench at the chess club, on a cot in the basement music club on Waverly place" (90). Once, he even slept in the armchair of some friend's home. Most of the time, he stayed in the San Fran, a hotel where Grandpa used to stay in his bachelor days. When Mah and the three children went to look for Leon, "he spit at her and slammed his hotel door shut." He "cursed Mah out. […] He said he didn't need Mah" (157).

Leon felt tortured that "Mah betrayed him" (157). For her betrayal, Mah had to pay him her moral debt as she was "still concerned about the issues of maintaining a proper face as a good wife, mother and woman within her Chinatown community" (Ho 215). She tried hard to make up with Leon: when he lived in the San Fran, she made him dinner and the children took it to him. Once, when Leon came back from the sea, she cooked a really good dinner, his favorites. She felt hurt when Leon refused to come home. She walked out of the kitchen and retired into her room, slamming the door "with a bang" (68).

Marrying a second husband, Mah had to redeem herself from her fallen-woman status again. Leon, however, was never at ease with her no matter how hard she tried to make up. Mah had admitted her wrong: "Everything is in the past." She said that "she wanted to be a family again" (159). Still, Leon would not move back. Not forgiven by her husband, it seems, Mah could never wholly redeem herself, which means that her moral debt could never be fully paid off and she must continue to pay.

Ng's portrayal of Mah is complicated and difficult to understand for the average American reader. She seems to embody the stories of the past. Her constant toil as a

seamstress and the effort to redeem herself from her "fallen-woman" status suggests that she was a traditional wife/mother. This means she fit the stereotypical image of the Chinese woman, who was a docile machine, suffering from sexism in the home, class exploitation in her ethnic community, and racism in the larger American society. Humiliated by her husband's disappearance from home, she still cared for him, cooking dinner to bring to the hotel for him; she bought him a watch on his trip to Hong Kong. Understanding his business schemes and failures, she told her children that "for a man with so many failures, Leon has a heart full of hope. Each new scheme, each voyage was his way of showing his heart" (163). Leila finally "saw what Mason had been saying all along: Mah loved Leon" (193).

This kind of portrayal of Mah is typical of a traditional Chinese woman, who sacrificed herself for the benefits of the family. Mah, however, was also resistant to her fate of being an immigrant woman. Her resistance was evidenced, in the first place, by marrying Leon for her green card. Marrying for the green card sounds like a gamble because she had to risk her married life. Such a risk shows her resistance to the exclusionary laws in U.S. history. Her resistance is also evidenced in her relationship with Tommie. Separated from her husband when he was at sea, she was lonely and needed someone to talk to. Besides, she had problems and needed help. She was attracted to Tommie probably because Tommie was always there to help her. Indeed, Leila's description of Mah's relationship with Tommie was not, in any way, romantic. It could simply be "[w]omen's talk, sewing lady gossip" (172). For, except for "Mah flying in Tommie Hom's arms," (82) there was nothing more to be

gossiped about. Yet, in Chinese culture, it was completely forbidden for a woman to take comfort in another man's arms: "Production stopped, and everybody stared at Mah sobbing into Tommie's big chest" (80). For this, Mah was humiliated by her husband, not only by his disappearance from home, but also by his verbal abuse. Mah was, of course, resistant to Leon, calling him a "do-nothing bum" (124). She countered his sexism in many quarrels. Once, Mah complained about his absence during which she might have had a miscarriage: "What about the first one? You didn't even think to come to the hospital. The first one, I say! Son or daughter, dead or alive, you didn't even come!" (35).

In the months after Ona's death, Leon and Mah fought all the time. There was one occasion when "Leon spit out Tommie Hom's name and Mah snapped right back, 'And you? Are you so good? And you've never done wrong'" (104)? The tension between them was, on the surface, caused by Mah's relationship with Tommie. In a deeper sense, it was the result of the material conditions in which they were living a difficult life. Mah's talking back was, therefore, significant not only in the sense that she resisted her husband's sexism, but that she resisted racial discrimination and economic injustice. Such injustices were evidenced in Mah's having to work at low wage jobs and live in a separated household. She had to work in addition to looking after her three children by herself when her husband was at sea. Tommie had to help her on occasions: when Grandpa Leong died, he had to help with his funeral. When Ona was missing as a child, he had to pick her up. In addition to all these, Tommie offered Mah employment twice: when she was abandoned by her first husband, and

when the Ong and Leong Laundry failed. In this way, Tommie is portrayed with complicated masculinity, good and bad at the same time. He was a friend who helped Mah whenever she needed help; he was also the boss who exploited Mah for excessive labor. Such a portrayal of Tommie deconstructs the binary view of good and evil.

Likewise, Mah is portrayed as a complicated character. She is a submissive and resistant woman at the same time. Such a portrayal is reflective of poststructural feminist ideas. As Simone de Beauvoir indicates, "One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one" (qtd. in Butler 1). This means that gender is a performance that "intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities." As a result, "gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts" (Butler 3). Butler's dynamic approach to exploring the female gender applies in the political context of Chinese exclusion. In such a context, Mah behaved differently in different moments of her life. She was a traditional wife/mother in the sense that she tried to redeem herself from her "fallen" woman's status by conforming to universal moral standards. Her efforts to redeem herself, however, did not bring her a happy life. Instead, she was disgraced by her husband's disappearance from home; she had to seek help from her friends in times of trouble. Her affair with Tommie, in this sense, was understandable, which serves as a form of resistance to her husband's sexist treatment, to patriarchal Chinatown values, and to racial, economic, and gender oppressions in the larger American society. Such kind of understanding is shared by the daughter-narrator who finally comes to terms with Mah and "wanted to see her happy" (Ng 19). Leila finally feels "tempted to fall back into the easiness of being Mah's daughter, of letting her be [her] whole life" (193).

"Nothing but Daughters" in a "Failed Family": Leila and Her Half-Sisters

Ng starts her novel with Chinatown gossip: "A failed family. That Dulci Fu. And you know which one: bald Leon. Nothing but daughters." Leila declared that "By Chinese standards, that wasn't lucky" (3). Ng then expresses her feminist concern by countering Chinatown gossip via Leila's step-father Leon: "People talking. People jealous." […] "Five sons don't make one good daughter" (3). Geollnicht comments that Ng's "focus on daughters to the exclusion of sons perhaps constitutes her own form of writerly revenge on patriarchal culture" ("Of Bones and Suicide" 313). As is demonstrated in *Bone*, Chinese patriarchal cultural values affect negatively the lives of Chinese immigrant families, specifically the lives of women. Leon's abusive reaction to Mah on hearing Chinatown gossip about her affair with Tommie shows how badly Leon was influenced by that culture. He judged Mah according to the fixed moral standards without considering the specific situation Mah was in. Leon and Mah's treatment of Nina's abortion was also cruel. They refused to understand Nina in the American cultural context in which she was so confused about cultural values that she made mistakes and needed more caring than verbal abuse.

Such stories show that, in Chinatown, different cultural values co-exist, collide, and cause conflicts between families, genders, and generations, which badly affect their relationships. In *Bone*, not only parents and daughters hold different cultural beliefs, but also the daughters themselves adopt different cultural attitudes. In a figurative sense, the daughters represent different cultural values: Ona, the obedient girl, represents the traditional Chinese idea of female submissiveness; Nina, the modern girl,

represents the American value of individual freedom; and Leila, caught between her parents and her boyfriend, represents both the Chinese value of family loyalty and the American values of freedom, individualism, and independence. Ng shows her approval for neither Ona nor Nina but for Leila, who is neither too Chinese nor too American. In this way, a Chinese American like herself is valued. This shows that Ng has found her "contingent 'in-between' space" in Homi Bhabha's terms (7). Addressing the relationship between Leila and her two sisters, Ng advocates "balance between oppositions" in Chinese America with a transnational consciousness (LeBlanc 11). In this section, I will discuss the lives of the three daughters and demonstrate how Ng, painfully aware of the tragic happenings in Chinatown, is negotiating between her two cultures in search of her Chinese American identity.

Ona, the Chinese Girl

As was stated, the central plot of the novel is how the members of the Leong family seek to understand Ona's suicide. Ona is a distinctive character: she is absent, thus has no voice in the novel. We understand her through the eyes of others: her parents, friends, and mostly her elder sister, Leila. Leila describes her as a Chinese girl, "repeatedly linked to Leon specifically and to the traditions of the first-generation Chinese immigrants generally" (Geollnicht, "Of Bones and Suicide' 319). When Leon was away, Ona counted off the days till Leon was coming home, and then she stood at the mouth of the alley, counting the cabs that went by. Every night that Leon was gone, she'd count out ninety-nine[23] kisses to keep him safe, to bring him back. Bearing the *on* (安peace) in her name Ona, she was a peacemaker between her parents:

"Ona probably worked the hardest at getting Leon to come home" (Ng 157). Ona was close to Leon and loved Leon's New Year ritual:

> NEW YEAR was Ona's holiday. She and Leon had a ritual; they laid out a feast for the gods: wine and fruit, a chicken, a fish, some steamed wheat buns. They lit the incense to call the gods down. The Eight Holy Immortals[24] one year; the next, the Goddess of Mercy;[25] another, it was the God of War[26] paired with the God of Books.[27] One year it was Jesus. Our Chinese School, Cumberland Presbyterian, handed out framed pictures of Jesus, and Ona believed him a god, too. And when Mao's Red Guards[28] destroyed Confucius's Temple, [29] Leon invited the Great Teacher[30] to come live with us. (107-08)

Ona was also close to Leon's old-timer friends. When they sent her to the corner store for sandwiches and cigarettes, she enjoyed doing it, saying: "it was better than staying at home" (158). Ona herself told Leila "how she felt outside Chinatown. She never felt comfortable, even with the Chinese crowd that Osvaldo hung around with; she never felt like she fit in" (173). On top of all these, Ona was typically the one who fulfilled her filial duties of obedience and respect. When Leon threatened to disown her when she was dating Osvaldo, the son of his cheating business partner, Ona could not disrespect Leon's wishes. Submissive to Leon, she broke off with Osvaldo and was reduced to the dutiful Chinese daughter (LeBlanc 17). Yet, unable to live with that reduction, she chose death over life: "Like she had no choice" (Ng 50). In this sense, Ona's death was, first of all, caused by her own belief in obedience and

respect held strongly in the Chinese patriarchal culture.

Leila, however, understood Ona's death at a deeper level. She attributed Ona's death to her parents' business failure, because, "stripped of his laundry business by Osvaldo's father, Leon turns on the world, and most viciously, he turns on his beloved daughter, Ona, as a scapegoat for his failures" (Ho 221). Leila observes that "Ona felt disappointed by Leon and betrayed by Mah" because "she had to suffer the blame for Ong & Leong's failure" (Ng 112, 139). Besides, as Geollnicht indicates, Ona's suicide, "shocking as it is for the family, is not wholly unprepared for within the familial context" ("Of Bones and Suicide" 319). Both parents contemplated and threatened suicide. Leon swore to jump from the Golden Gate: he "told [Mah] not to bother with burying him because even when dead, he wouldn't be far enough away," implying that his spirit would haunt her (Ng 31). Mah, too, threatened death: "I will jump from the Golden Gate" (188). Killing herself, "Ona becomes the material incarnation of their verbal threats, the enunciation of their speech acts, the embodiment of their American dream turned nightmare, the sign of their exclusion and disappearance" (Geollnicht 319). For the first generation Chinese immigrants, Ona's broken body "becomes the sign of both their failure to win 'America' and their failure to hold onto 'China' in 'America'" (320). This is "more than simply a failure to succeed at a material level; it is a failure to be incorporated into the nation's body" (317). Thus, although Ona's suicide is her own way of escaping from the deadlocked situation after Leon's business failure, Ng leads us to read the tragic incident in terms of broad social and economic circumstances that Leon's family has faced (Chae 84).

Nina, the American Girl

To Nina, "Ona's problem is her inability to separate from her family" (Ho 222). Nina "decided to do things on her own" because she saw "how Ona's need for them [parents] destroyed her" (Ng 112). Leila seemed sympathetic with Nina's self-exile in New York because their parents were hard on her for her abortion: "Mah and Leon joined forces and ganged up on her, said awful things, made her feel like she was a disgrace. Nina was rotten, doomed, no-good. Good as dead. She'd die in a gutter without rice in her belly, and her spirit — if she had one — wouldn't be fed" (25). They thought ill of Nina because, in traditional Chinese culture, it was a disgrace for a girl to be pregnant before she got married. Leon and Mah held fast to that cultural belief even though values change as society changes. Their refusal to acknowledge change in their American social circumstances is another example of generational conflicts caused by different cultural values.

Sympathetic with Nina for how their parents devalued her, Leila, however, felt bad about Nina's indifference to Ona's death. When she called to tell Nina about Ona, Leila says, "Everything Nina said — or didn't say — bothered me. I interpreted her quiet as not wanting to come" (151). When Leila picked Nina up at the airport, there was a deadly silence between them. Leila talked to Nina in her head: "What the hell are you thinking? Who do you think you are, breezing off the plane, coming home when all the hard stuff has been taken care of, wearing a totally wrong color,[31] and then getting all bent out of shape when I'm just trying to give you warning" (155)? Leila was angry at Nina because she did not seem to care. "Let it go," she said, "Ona had

her own life. It was her choice" (51).

Unlike Ona who chose death, Nina chose to be American. The two sisters, in drastically different ways, escaped from their family in the same sense that they broke free from the Chinese tradition that held them from moving towards their dreams of freedom. While Ona's choice of death is painful, Nina's self-exile is also hurting. Gee calls Nina a "quintessential assimilationist" (136). LeBlanc comments on her assimilation, saying: Nina "achieves her American identity by leaving Chinatown and disregarding her family's past" (17). Such a position is not favored by Asian literary/ cultural critics. Cheung, for example, points out that the "desire to be recognized as American is understandable, but such rightful recognition should not have to be achieved at the expense of Asian affiliation" (*Articulate Silences* 17).

Leila "In-Between"

Different from Ona, the traditional girl who remained faithful to her parents in her Chinese way, and Nina, the modern girl who lived in New York in her American way, Leila remained distant from both of them. Leila told the story of how she was mean to Ona when they were younger. One day, when she saw Ona hiding in a stall of the school bathroom, crying, with her socks around her ankles and her dress a mess, she did not ask why she was crying. Instead, she scolded her for ruining the dress Mah had stayed up all night to finish. Now, she asked herself why she was more concerned with Mah than with Ona. It might be that she was resentful of Ona's being too Chinese.

Leila was not close to Nina, either. She thought their temperament separated

them. She endured things. She could shut her heart and let Mah and Leon rant. But 'Nina couldn't. She yelled back. She said things. She left" (25). Believing that "she only thought of herself," Leila says, "it didn't surprise me that she was the first to leave or that she went so far away" (113, 112). Leila, had her resentments, though. She resented Nina her fast move, her safe distance; she resented her three thousand miles. Such resentments show that Leila did not like Nina's way of treating the family. Her self-exile in New York was, to Leila, "a form of escape, a fleeing of familial responsibilities" (Geollnicht, "Of Bones and Suicide" 319).

Leila, however, went through a transformation in her feelings for her sisters after Ona's death. She felt regret: "I should have asked Ona, Why are you crying? What are you sad about? I wish I'd hugged her, kissed her cheeks" (Ng 137). Leila felt bad that she had not said something that might have anchored her. Visiting New York, Leila wanted a better relationship with Nina: "I want[ed] an intimacy with her I hadn't had with Ona the last few years" (25). Leila's change of feelings about sisterhood symbolizes her change of attitudes toward her two cultures.

Leila's change of cultural attitudes toward her two cultures is also expressed via her feelings towards her fathers. Originally, Leila felt a division between Lyman, her "real" biological father, and Leon, her step-father. And, just as she was distant to her biological father in Australia who abandoned her, she did not feel attached to her step-father Leon in America, either. The distant feeling "parallels the division experienced by many Chinese Americans over their relationships to China and America," (Geollnicht 313), a feeling of belonging to neither. Yet, as Leon always

told her: “it’s time that makes a family, not just blood.” Leila discovered that Leon was as true a father as she could find —“he’s the one who’s been there for me” (Ng 3). The reconciliation between Leila and Leon, an American citizen, though with a “paper-son” identity, symbolizes the fact that Leila recognized her ties with America as a Chinese American.

The fact that Leila was caught between her parents and her boyfriend was also symbolic: she was caught between her Chinese culture of family loyalty and her American value of individual freedom and happiness. Just as she could not give her parents or her boyfriend up, she could not give up either culture, which symbolizes that she belonged to both cultures. Having recognized that she was part China, part America, Leila, therefore, lived between two cultures. Like Ona, she kept her Chinese part. Nina saw how Leila was locked into living Mah’s and Leon’s lives for them. She spoke of it with much sympathy: “Look, you’ve always been on standby for them. Waiting and doing things their way. Think about it, they have no idea what our lives are about. They don’t want to come into our worlds. We keep on having to live in their world. They don’t move one bit” (33). Indeed, life after Ona's death was “like being pulled back and forth between Mah and Mason. All that worry about Leon, his lights,[32] his living alone at the San Fran” (50). These facts show that Leila's parents still lived in their old world without acknowledging the different cultural values their daughters held.

Caring for her parents as a responsible daughter was one part of Leila. Like Nina, however, she believed in her middle class values of individual freedom and

lived a life her American way. Gee indicates that Leila did not try to contradict Mah. But when Mah tried to speak as a traditional Chinese parent, Leila simply rejected the notion of obedience and submission (136). For example, when Mah objected to her sleeping with Mason before they got married, her voice "sounded harsh" (Ng 190). She "was getting close to Mason and [she] wanted [her] own life" (171). For love, she would stand with Mason and cater to their emotional needs.

Showing her passionate love for Mason is a proof of her American way: the night after her mother brewed them ginseng tea, Leila narrates, "I moved first. I kissed the hollow of Mason's throat, I licked his mouth lobe. Mason followed, urgent" (54). The subtext here, "is that she is the aggressive one, the initiator, unmistakably fulfilling her own needs, displaying an American prioritization of individuality again" (Gee 131). In Chinese culture, this is seldom the case. It is often the man that takes the initiative in sexual matters.

Leila's American way is also witnessed in her measurement of her step-father by American conventional standards. At the social security office, for example, she yelled at Leon when he failed to behave in a proper way. The young officer asked Leon many questions about his past: why he had so many aliases, so many different dates of birth, etc. Infuriated, Leon started cursing:

"Iiiinamahnagahgoddammcocksucksonnahvabitch!"

Leila figured out that Leon picked up the cursing from his shipmates who used it to curse him out. When Leon said to the officer: "People be the tell me. I never talk English good. Them tell me," Leila could not stand him any more: "This is fucked.

The way you do things is fucked" (56). It is obviously rude in any culture for a girl to speak to her parent that way. In Chinese culture, especially, the most important virtues expected of a girl is obedience and respect. Here, not only did Leila reject traditional behavior by "yelling at her old man" (56), but also the profanity of her language disrupted tradition to a shocking degree.

Leila was also American enough to challenge her mother's work ethic. Before Mah's trip to Hong Kong, she wanted to keep the Baby Store open while she was gone but she wouldn't ask Leon, and Leila made it clear she didn't want to do it. This sounds unusual by Chinese standards because a daughter was supposed to help, especially in matters of making money. However, Laila thought of her own life during Mah's absence rather than worrying about her business. Once again, the stereotype of the dutiful, submissive daughter is disrupted. Leila clearly forsakes traditional Chinese filial obedience and responsibility for her individualistic desires, for romance or for passionate love.

Just as Leila was both Chinese and American within the family, she was the same with the people around her. She resented people who went too American. For example, she was critical of Dale, Mason's cousin, for his assimilating entirely into the mainstream American society. Although she knew "[h]is house, his business and even his smooth English all counted for something," she felt that she "could never go with a guy like him" (45). A class bias was immediately felt in her attitude toward recent immigrants. As Americanized as Leila was, Dale was still not Chinese enough for her.

Leila, however, was American enough to construct Leon's old timer friends as "Other." She called them "time wasters" (7), "scraps of dark remnant fabric" (8), "fleabag friends" (9), "Chinatown drift-abouts" (13), and "talkers, wanderers and time wasters" (142). She even thought that Zeke Louis, the guy Mason worked with, was not tall enough to carry off his tight fit of muscle and nerve. She told Nina that Zeke was too "Chinatown" (40). Leila's reaction to Nina's boyfriend Zhang in New York was also negative: "Everything struck me as strange: Nina saying Guangzhou, Shanghai, Xian…Nina staying with a Chinese guy" (28). There was a racial or ethnic judgment in these cases as she spoke "with an American sensibility" (Gee 132).

Through Leila, Ng provides us with a complex Chinese American identity that repudiates either/or choices. At the same time, Ng finds it difficult to adopt both/and positions of an integrated subjectivity (Geollnicht, "Of Bones and Suicide" 313). Through Leong's family tragedy, Ng shows that "belonging in America for people of color is never simply a choice but always a battle against forces that would cast them out as irrevocably Other" (313). Such a battle in the history of Chinese exclusion is so cruel that it costs human lives not only because of cultural differences, but also because of racial discrimination and political/economic injustices.

Summary

In this chapter of study on Ng's *Bone*, I have studied Leon Leong's family history in San Francisco Chinatown by addressing how the family tries to understand

the tragic death of the middle daughter Ona, discussing specifically how the parents and their two other daughters, Leila and Nina, react to her suicide. The different reactions between the parents and daughters and between the daughters themselves reflect different cultural attitudes and habits. However, Ng successfully shows that their tragedy is not simply the result of cultural difference. It is complicated by other factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, and national origin in addition to the "labor exploitation and conflicts among racial minorities within ethnic communities" (Chae 29). The failure of Ong and Leong's laundry (Ong is originally from Peru) is an example of ethnic conflict, which tragically, though indirectly, causes Ona's death. Tommie Hom, a fellow Chinese man Mah is attracted to, is also her boss, a subcontractor who exploits her for excessive labor. Their relationship as boss/worker and lover/loved is destructive to the Leong family initially formed out of necessity: Mah marries Leon for her green card. The fact that Leon purchases citizenship papers to become a citizen and that Mah marries him for a green card exposes the political history in which the Chinese were legally excluded by immigrant laws and marriage laws. Consequences of legal exclusion include economic exclusion which denies the Chinese job opportunities. As a result, they can hardly achieve their dreams of material success.

What Ng is critiquing is the "model minority" representation in mainstream culture and literature. Unlike the popular ideology of Chinese/Asian immigrants as "a model minority," who quickly settled down in the United States as middle class and moved away from ethnic communities, the Leong's unstable family life in

Chinatown challenges the myth of immigrant success (Chae 81). The Leongs are a "model minority" family only in the sense that they work hard. Work is their whole life. Also, Leon qualifies as a "model minority" man in the sense that he does not feel good to rely on the government. For example, when Leila suggests "social security" or "retirement" to Leon, he doesn't like the word and gives Leila "his noncommittal shrug, saying, "I'll wait and see" (Ng 55). In terms of the material well-being of the Leong family, they are not at all the "middle class model minority" propagated in national magazine articles. Instead, they are poor working-class people living in cramped and impoverished material conditions, their jobs labor-intensive, menial, low paying, and exhausting. Telling the Leong's family stories, Ng counters the monolithic representation that "*some* racial and ethnic groups are moving towards acceptable forms of assimilation and acculturation into the 'American Dream'" (Ho 211).

In countering hegemonic discourse about the "model minority," Ng employs specific narrative strategies. First, her narrative is disrupted in time and space. The narrative moves backward in time, in a reverse approach to the suicide of Ona. In "Discolonization, Displacement, Disidentification," Lowe comments on this strategy:

> One effect of the reverse narration is that *causality* as a means of investigation is disorganized. While Ona's death appears initially as the originating loss that would seem either to motivate the reverse chronology or to resolve a progressive one, when the event of the suicide is at last reached, it dissolves, apprehensible not as an origin but as a symptom of

the Leong's family collective condition. (122)

In this reverse chronology where effect precedes cause, as Juliana Chang puts it, "the reader expects the eventual, climatic revelation of the cause of Ona's death. What we find, instead, is not a singular cause, but rather the diffuse unfolding of hardship, sorrow, and endurance" (113). As a result, the novel, and its narrator, cannot give a good reason for Ona's death; the logic of cause and effect, the metanarratives of moral accountability, are thus left unfulfilled (Kim 44). Ng seems to deconstruct the binary opposition between cause and effect as it is complicated by unusual racial, social, and economic conditions.

Ng deconstructs the binary opposition between Chinese and American cultural values as well. In E. Chow's words, she deconstructs the binaries between the values of familial loyalty vs. individual interest, obedience vs. independence, self-control vs. self-expression, and fatalism vs. change (qtd. in Kafka, *(Un)doing the Missionary Position* 52). LeBlanc thinks that "It is to these dualisms that *Bone* speaks as both a private and national allegory criticizing Chinatown and society in general for 'intolerance of difference' and exclusivity" (11). Ng's dualism is witnessed in her portrayal of the daughter-narrator, Leila, who is a combination of Ona and Nina, symbolizing her middle-ground position between her Chinese and American cultural values. Establishing an "alternative space" (Bhahba 1) for Leila, Ng favors her with a perfect loving relationship with Mason. The message is clear: it is wise for Chinese Americans to find their "in-between space" (1) so as to succeed in their American Dream of happiness.

Of course, as LeBlanc states, neither "the blending of two cultures" nor a wholeness that overcomes opposition can account fully for the effects of gender and ethnicity on Leila's experience of and response to binaries (11). For the Chinese, Ona is a victim of social injustice. Her suicide is a trope of failure to negotiate hybrid subjectivities, a self-projection of abuse of female bodies identified as "Asian" rather than as "Asian American" (Geollnicht 322). Such a pitiful history does not mean that cultures should remain hostile to each other. Instead, it is extremely important to understand the concept of improving present social conditions. Through the portrayal of Leila in her "in-between" position, Ng suggests that we should privilege those who can best negotiate traditional Chinese and American spaces so as to understand things from the points of view of both cultures.

With such transnational consciousness, Ng portrays her narrator Leila as a quest figure journeying from "ambiguous consciousness" (Kafka, *(Un)doing the Missionary Position* 1) to "self affirmation" (Kim 253). In such a journey, Ng/Leila affirms a self "who transcends dual personality by resisting reduction to a single ethnic identity, by recognizing gender and race asymmetry underlying the dualisms she faces, and by responding with 'new' language that simultaneously liberates and threatens her power of discourse" (LeBlanc 21). Via the politics of difference, Ng acknowledges the material reality of living with difference, and consciously negotiates between the differences. To appreciate both values, Ng advocates balance in her attempt "to find a center that is neither too Chinese nor too American" (Gee 129). Her balanced position reflects the ideas of negotiating cultures held by Asian

cultural critics. Bhabha, for example, states that the "social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation" (2). In *Bone*, after various transformations, Leila comes to terms with both Chinese and American cultures. Recognizing her "in-between" identity, Ng/Leila has negotiated between her home cultural values of family unity and her adopted cultural beliefs in individual freedom and independence, thus expressing her themes of cultural conflicts and negotiations successfully. Presenting such themes, Ng conveys that Chinese Americans should be conscious of their cultural roots in their process of being Americanized so as to survive and succeed in America.

Chapter IV

THE DREAM OF "THE PROFESSIONAL MIDDLE CLASS" FAMILY IN GISH JEN'S *TYPICAL AMERICAN*

Introduction

This chapter discusses Gish Jen's first novel, *Typical American* (1991), in which Jen portrays Ralph Chang and his family aspiring to make it into America's middle and upper classes in the 1950s. *Typical American* examines the disorienting freedom and often illusory promises of America through the tragic stories of this immigrant family. As is noted in Chapter III, the Chinese who came to America in the mid-twentieth century were mostly intellectual elites and their most intellectually capable and scientifically directed children. They were referred to by Yongsuk Chae as the "middle-class model minority" (24). As has been mentioned, Peter Kwong coined the phrase "Uptown Asians" to refer to this "professional middle class, whose members are well educated and financially secure though they experience the 'glass ceiling.'" In contrast to the Uptown Asians, Kwong uses the term "Downtown Asians" to refer to the other group, the working class Asians, "who live in concentrated ethnic ghettos, are paid low wages, have been neglected by American authorities, and suffer from all types of social problems" (77). In *Bone*, as is discussed in Chapter III, Ng counters the mainstream representation of the "model minority" family by addressing the underrepresented and poverty-stricken "Downtown Asians." In *Typical American*, the protagonists are likewise "far from the model minority" (Jen, qtd. in "Interview by Rachel Lee" 228) but in a different sense: the protagonists started from an impoverished

life as graduate students, obtained their degrees, and became the professional middle class, but, when they went into business, they fell in the pitfalls of the American Dream.

Set initially in Manhattan, New York, and later in the suburbs of Connecticut, *Typical American* tells the story of Ralph Chang, who is joined by his sister Theresa and marries her friend, Helen. Together, the family struggles against poverty as graduate students, marvel at their success in their careers and American life styles, but suffer subsequently from Ralph's business adventures. Don Lee indicates that *Typical American* follows the three Chinese immigrants as "they pursue the American Dream and struggle against the pressures of assimilation, greed, and self-interest" (220). As they pursue their American lives — getting married, having children, moving into the suburbs, and venturing into moneymaking and love making — they learn to understand the essence of the American Dream and what it means to be a "typical American."

Jen starts *Typical American* with "IT IS AN American story" (3) and guides her readers through the Chang family's immigrant experience in the United States. Claiming that "the Changs are not any less American than anyone else" in her 1991 interview with Yuko Matsukawa, Jen says, first, that she was writing against public expectation of the "exotic stuff that makes them feel like they're traveling in some foreign country" (115). Then, in her interview with Martha Satz in the same year, Jen expresses her concern with the readers that "I hope *Typical American* will be viewed not only as an immigrant story but as a story for all Americans, to make us think about what our myths and realities are" (134).

In her interview with Rachel Lee about ten years later, Jen claims again that

she is telling an American story: “When I wrote that opening line, ‘This is an American story,’ I was redefining an American tradition” (220). The American tradition is one in which “American narratives appeal through their abstraction — their ideological dress of lofty idealism, wherein ‘boundless individualism’ signifies human freedom, and self-making implies class mobility and social equality” (Rachel Lee, “Gendered Codes of Americanness” 70). In this tradition, simply put, everybody is promised the American Dream of individual freedom and material success.

Central to this tradition is Emerson and Thoreau’s Transcendental philosophy of the 1850s which associates success with self-reliance and, more importantly, with self-made material wealth. Unlike typical American success stories, however, *Typical American* does not end in success. Concluding her book with “America is no America” (296), Jen implies that the country does not keep its promises of riches, especially for those who are not white Americans. Also, in the American tradition, the national trope of self-making often “reveals itself as male self-making” (Lee, “Gendered Codes” 61). As a result, in most literary texts at that time, man conquers nature single-handedly, which suggests that the American Dream was meant for men, not for women. In the same way, Ralph adopts certain models of masculine behavior and hopes to be accepted as American. Furthermore, “Jen depicts the ‘start of [Ralph’s] success story ... the start of self-made man’ (193) through his communing with Grover against the desires of his family and over the bodies of women” (61). Still, women play a great role in men’s self-making: “one might recall Helen and

Theresa laboring to make the house hold" (62). And, when women reject men's desires, the homo-social bonding of men stops and business fails.

In quite a different sense, Betsy Huang addresses the issue of redefinition, stating that "Gish rewrites the script that has long dominated Chinese-American immigrant fiction, and complicates firm notions of Chinese and American identities that have been staple elements of the script" (62). Huang means that "Jen does not draw a distinct line between what is American and what is Chinese and place her characters on either side of the line; rather, she disrupts stereotypes through a combination of parody and role reversal" (65). Satz expresses a similar view in her interview: "It is an inversion. *Typical American* is a kind of put-down of America by those who are themselves being put down." (134). Jen confirms the point, saying that the Changs "fall under the negative judgment of their original critique" (134).

It is probably in these senses — Ralph's money making scheme does not end in success, women play a big role in men's self-making, and there is a role reversal, a kind of put-down of America — that Jen is redefining the American tradition. As a result, as Phillipa Kafka indicates, "whoever and whatever are 'typical American' is not ultimately the issue, so much as how the pursuit of material gain alone disempowers Chinese American men and women" ("Cheap, On Sale, American Dream" 124). Yet, Wendy Smith thinks that Jen is "hyper-conscious of the links between individual fulfillment and what society permits" (59). As a result, Jen claims freedom and the limits of human effort to conquer the world to be her major theme (TuSmith 24, Zhou 157). True, *Typical American* is about the Changs'

upward mobility, a climb up the social ladder accompanied by an accelerated appetite for material gain. Yet, as Shirley Lim indicates, the novel "interrogates even as it reinscribes American bourgeois narratives of capital competition and individual psychic struggle and survival" ("Immigration and Diaspora" 301). Lim implies that there is more to its general theme of human limits than was previously acknowledged by the author. Lee points out plainly that "Jen questions the American myth of a raceless society," whose narrative "suggests that the Changs would be considered all-Americans if not for the color of their skin" ("Gendered Codes" 48, 46).

In this sense, *Typical American* is not race-free. In fact, when Jen claims that she is telling an American story, she is claiming America. Her understanding of America is quite different from how America is generally defined. For her, America is not simply white; it is a multicolored country in which every citizen is rightfully American, regardless of his/her race, ethnicity, and national origin. Such an idea of America is expressed in her conversation with Satz. When Satz tells Jen that her children are adopted and they're bi-racial, so they are black and white and Jewish, Jen responds: "Which is very American" (137). Also, in "About Gish Jen," Don Lee indicates that Jen's reaction to critics who quickly labeled her as an Asian American writer was to complicate what that means via her second novel, *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996). A sequel of sorts, *Mona* "is a riotous, provocative collision of social, ethnic, and racial issues, populated by a mishmash of characters who are Chinese, Jewish, black, Wasp, and Japanese." Surprised, a journalist actually asked her "why *Mona in the Promised Land* had 'no real Americans in it'" (220, 222).

In her complicated way, Jen claims America, believing that it belongs to every race rather than belonging to white Americans only. In this sense, Jen's claiming to tell an American story does not mean that she rejects her Chinese American identity. Instead, she is quite conscious of being a Chinese American. When asked whether she thinks her son Luke should know some Chinese, she says without hesitation that she would like him to know more than she does. She says, however, that "it's more important for him to understand what it means to be Asian-American than it is for him to speak Chinese" (qtd. in Satz 139). Conscious of her ethnicity, Jen is quite concerned about ethnic issues. She tells reporters, "If there is one thing I hope readers come away with, it's to see Asian Americans as 'us' rather than 'other'" (Feldman 27). She says that "it's important to be politically sensitive" (Smith 60), which expresses her concern for American politics regarding race and race relations. *Typical American*, in this sense, is "about Asians adjusting to the United States, about national character and biculturalism" (Rachel Lee, "Interview" 230).

Given that *Typical American* is both an American and Chinese American story, I discuss Ralph's upward mobility in the following aspects. I first address "the paradox of freedom and limits [as] a major theme of Jen's novel" (Zhou 157). Analyzing her realistic portrayal of characters/events to demonstrate that there are differences between myths and realities, I will pay attention to her naturalistic elements in the portrayal of characters as well. Presenting the tension between man and society in the face of certain mysterious forces, Jen conveys that men are limited in their ability to achieve their dreams. I then contextualize Ralph's story in its

social context and address the problem of race and race relations before I discuss the stories of women. For, though *Typical American* "questions human omnipotence" (Schaefer 10) and challenges "the American myth of a raceless society" (Lee, "Gendered Codes" 48), Jen shows her gender concerns by telling the stories of women, namely, Ralph's wife, Helen, and his elder sister, Theresa, pertaining to women's relationship with men in striving for their dreams. Jen presents her gender theme through the character of Helen, who resists sexism by enjoying her sexual freedom with Grover Ding, her husband's business friend. Through Helen, Jen presents her class theme, too. A girl from a wealthy family in Shanghai, China, she lives her life as the wife of a poor immigrant student in "downtown" New York. Life with a sexist husband changes her from a "fragile" upper class girl to a resourceful wife with housekeeping and homemaking skills which empower her as a woman. Through Ralph's elder sister, Theresa, Jen presents more of her gender theme and the theme of cultural integration. Theresa obtains her doctoral degree in medicine, works as an intern, but becomes deeply involved in a love affair with the husband of her friend. Situated in her specific familial and social contexts, Theresa might be said to be challenging sexism at home and racism in society while pursuing her dream of individual freedom. As "a misfit" (Jen 48) in her relationship with men and a nonconformist, Theresa is negotiating her Chinese self with her multiple American identities as an unmarried Chinese American woman intellectual.

Telling Helen's and Theresa's stories, Jen presents the tensions between husband and wife and between brother and sister. Jen states that, in America, "one

of the big themes is the individual in society — for me, the society that really matters is often the family." She says that "probably self and family is a big tension along which I write" (Lee, "Interview" 226). When Jen presents the tensions between the self and family, she is, at the same time, bridging the values of her birth culture of China and her adopted culture of America. In other words, Jen is advocating the cultural values of family unity and individual freedom. Those who ignore their cultural roots are doomed.

A "Self-Made Man": Ralph Chang's Upward Mobility

In *Typical American*, Ralph, the protagonist, arrived in America as a graduate student in the late 1940s; his initial dream was to obtain his master's degree in mechanical engineering. Having obtained the degree, he continued for his doctoral study, after which he became an assistant professor in that field. He married his sister's friend Helen and had two lovely daughters. They bought a car and suburban house and enjoyed their life as middle class Americans. They amused themselves with their dream of success: "A Paradise, they agreed. An ocean liner compared to a rowboat with leaks. A Cadillac compared to an aisle seat on the bus. Every dream come dreamily true" (Jen 158). Things were going well when Ralph became more infatuated with the American Dream, believing that "Anything could happen" (42).

Ralph was induced into a money making scheme by Grover Ding, an ABC — American-Born Chinese, — who had no degree but lots of property, a "millionaire," as he introduces himself. Rising from "rags to riches" as a "self-made man," Grover

told Ralph "How a self-made man should always say he was born in something like a log cabin, preferably with no running water. How all self-made men found what they needed to know in bookstores. How he should close some deals with handshakes" (107). From Grover, Ralph learned about the myth of self-making. Grover's economic achievement, for Ralph, seemed an example of how, by dint of hard work, improvisation, and charm, one could become a "millionaire."

Ralph believed in the myth of self-making also because it has been dominant in American culture. In such a culture, it is generally believed, one can assess one's value according to one's own rather than someone else's standards. Such a myth has its roots in Emerson and Thoreau's transcendentalism. Rachel Lee indicates that "Thoreau's *Resistance to Civil Government* proposes a radical freedom from social obligations, most emphatically the law, and Emerson's 'Self-Reliance' acts as a manifesto on answering to no one but oneself" ("Failed Performances of the Nation" 69). As naïve immigrants, Jen's characters believe that equal opportunity exists in the promised land of America and, as long as they work hard, they can become rich.

Influential to Ralph was also "Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking*, the classic statement that a 'can-do' attitude and the ability to imagine oneself a success will lead to magnificent individual achievement" (TuSmith 21). From *The Power of Positive Thinking*, a book that Professor Pierce gave him, Ralph first learned of the limitless self: "A man is what he makes up his mind to be" (Jen 186). Ralph believed in the power of positive thinking so much that he papered an entire wall of his home office with inspirational quotes:

> ALL RICHES BEGIN IN AN IDEA.
>
> WHAT YOU CAN CONCEIVE, YOU CAN ACHIEVE.
>
> DON'T WAIT FOR YOUR SHIP TO COME IN, SWIM OUT TO IT.
>
> […]
>
> YOU CAN NEVER HAVE RICHES IN GREAT QUANTITY UNLESS YOU WORK YOURSELF INTO THE WHITE HEAT OF DESIRE FOR MONEY. (198-99)

Kafka remarks that "Those familiar with Emerson and Thoreau's Transcendental discourse immediately recognize Jen's clever distortions used to convey the contemporary American degradation from the nineteenth century original" ("Cheap, On Sale" 106-07). There were other books in his office, too. *Making Money*; *Be Your own Boss!; Ninety Days to Power and Success.* These books associated success with self-reliance and, most importantly, with self-made material wealth.

To be a self-made man, Ralph started a FRIED CHICKEN restaurant. Of course, Ralph had his misgivings about switching careers because he had just got tenure. It was a difficult process because tenure had to be approved at all three levels — the department, College of Engineering, and, finally, the university. Reflective of his professional experience and application process, Ralph felt horrified:

> Sometimes he saw himself hunched over his rooming house desk, working on his master's thesis; he remembered the lonely desperation with which he'd worried the equations. And with what […] might he had striven for tenure! For how many years he had oriented his very being toward it, like

> a Muslim toward Mecca! Now, finally, he was truly professor Chang; he wasn't sure he was ready to return to plain Ralph, or, worse yet, Yifeng [Ralph's Chinese given name]. (Jen 195)

Yet, believing in what Grover had said, "this could be the start of a real success story" (193), "he took his own wife, his own family, his job, his house, and gambled as though they were nothing to him, as though his whole life were nothing to him — as though, indeed, his whole life weren't his" (179). It was a modest start, though: the restaurant stood by itself as the smallest shingle building he'd ever seen.

Fortunately, business was good at first. Sometimes, as Theresa witnessed, "watching the customers file in, the sales ring up, she began to see commerce as part of the stream of life" (200). At this point, Ralph experienced America as a land of opportunities where "anything is possible" (106). Things would have been all right had the business gone on that way. Yet, Ralph had an idea: he wanted to expand the restaurant by putting up an additional floor. His efforts to become a self-made man took a tragic turn after that. A couple of months after the construction was completed, the entire structure began to collapse. They found out later from the former owner of the business that there were logs in the soil so that the land "was unstable and unbuildable" (Jen 244). Ralph was thus trapped in the pitfalls of the American Dream: he not only lost his business but also ran over his sister with his car in his desperate state of mind after he found out about his wife's affair with Grover. It was only then that he realized that "He was not what he made up his mind to be" (296).

Telling Ralph's stories, Jen shows that the American Dream of getting rich motivates Ralph's business ventures. He told his daughters the story of a boy who slept in some kind of strange bed: "That bed is a big box he is built by himself, make out of one piece wood. And inside the box is not the regular blanket. Inside is all those paper money." To make his point clear, he concluded: "Money. In this country, you have money, you can do anything. You have no money, you are nobody, you are Chinaman" (Jen 197, 199)! Such money worship drove him into "going up, up, up!" until he was finally down (236). After he lost his business, ironically, he expressed his pity for Grover to feel better: "*That man, he has no family. All he has is his empire, and so much money, he doesn't know how to spend it*" (250). Worse than Grover who had his empire, however, Ralph had nothing. The family had to sell their house to pay for business debts and hospital bills. Ralph's business failure demonstrates that the American Dream is nothing but a myth.

Critiquing Ralph's money worship through Theresa, Jen exposes other social evils. When Theresa heard Ralph's story about money, she told the girls: "That's not true. He is making it up!" To Ralph, she warned: "*You're just joking, but the girls believe you*" (198). Silenced, she listened on, listening for so long that some of what Ralph had to say almost made sense: "She'd seen how poor people were treated in the hospital; they died waiting. And to be nonwhite in this society was indeed to need education, accomplishment — some source of dignity" (200). Such remarks expose poverty, disease, and racial cruelty in America.

Ralph's business failure demonstrates that men are not what they make up

their minds to be, restricted by their natural and social conditions. Jen conveys that, in the tension between man and his environment, he is often victimized, which shows that Jen is quite a naturalist. Jen's fatalism was first expressed in a bee sting, after which, Ralph could hardly see: "His whole brow was swelling as though with a third eye" (89). The bee sting, ironically, is symbolic. Lee comments that:

> Jen's comparison of the bee sting to a third eye — presumably, an instrument of enhanced perception — occasions further ironies. Ralph's forehead literally grows larger, his swollen-headedness becoming an apt metaphor for his search for a godlike stature, yet also posing a barrier to any increased insight into the self. ("Gendered Codes" 57)

Something so small as a bee interrupts Ralph's self-deification. The bee sting, a symbol of man's lack of control over fate, foreshadows Ralph's business failure in which natural force plays a vital part: the ground on which the restaurant stood can not support the weight of a second story, and there was nothing Ralph could do to stop the building from sinking. The restaurant had to close, after which other misfortunes happened to the family. The shaky ground symbolizes the precarious foundation of the American Dream.

Describing the business collaboration between Ralph and Grover, moreover, Jen shows that Ralph's business failure is the result of hostile social conditions. As a result, society was largely to blame for his tragedy. That is, Ralph's desire for self-development resulted from a sense of anxiety and crisis in America in which he was badly treated. Jen tells several stories about how Ralph and his family were

mistreated in school and society at large. First, in his dream for American education as a graduate student in the late 1940s, Ralph experienced poverty. To make a living, he had to work as a butcher, killing chickens:

> At dawn he would get up, wash, put on his bloody clothes and walk to the store basement, where by the light of a yellow forty-watt bulb, crates of animals surrounding him — pigs and rabbits against one wall, pigeons and snakes against another — he would kill and clean and pluck hours upon hours of chickens. The first week he vomited daily from the stench of the feces and offal and rotting meat. But the second week he only blanched, and by the third he worked as though indigenous to this world. (34)

Second, in his dream for a girl, Ralph experienced a terrible failure: he loved Cammy, a white girl secretary to the foreign student adviser. However, after he dated her for a while, Cammy told him that she was going to have a honeymoon in Paris with someone who "had a house and car, and had had a wife, until the papers finally came through" (Jen 20). Ralph's failure to win Cammy implies that "he is racially excluded from the category of American, because he does not have a house and a car, not to mention a honeymoon in Paris" (Chi-ming Wang 83).

Ralph's next catastrophe is that he forgot to renew his student visa. Failing to get help from the foreign student adviser, he talked to Mr. Pinkus, the chair of his department, who promised to help at first. However, after Mr. Pinkus called the foreign student adviser, and after he saw Ralph hang around his residence, hoping to meet him by chance, he called him a liar, a sneak:

> "Do you hear me? This is America you're in now. If you want to lie, you want to sneak around, you should go back to China. Here in America, what we have is morals. Right and wrong. We don't sneak around." […] "We have morals! You keep hanging around my daughter, I'll shoot you!" (40)

Such comic portrayal exaggerates the characters' speeches and behavior so as to reveal Ralph's ignorance and Pinkus's biases in their cross cultural encounters, in which Ralph was told to "go back to China," a specific example of Chinese exclusion. This comic scene, according to Zhou, "is reminiscent of the representations of the morally decrepit Chinese, […] a personification of the 'yellow peril,'" and a stereotype that "has been used to justify the exclusion of Chinese immigrants and help perpetuate their alienation in American culture" (154-55).

Shocked at such an intercultural encounter, Ralph stared, speechless. He was deeply hurt and angry. Poor and powerless, there was nothing he could do. The lines of blood crisscrossed: "He was going to kill himself tomorrow, in front of Pinkus's house. He woke up still holding the cleaver" (Jen 41). Jen describes:

> And now that he was awake, he was hungry, he realized. His stomach burned. And his bladder — the old facts. He sat up slowly, blinked. Swallowed. Dust in his mouth. He tried to spit. He rubbed his face with his hands. What now? He walked his buttocks to the edge of the bed. A hand on each knee. He rocked himself up. Staggered a bit, crunching. (44)

In many ways, as Jen indicates in her interview with Rachel Lee, "*Typical American* was about bigotry — the prejudice against the Changs" (224). For a time, Ralph's American Dream ended in "no job, no family, no visa" (Jen 45). Just then, luck favored him with a miracle: "after months and months of calling, his sister, Theresa, found him slumped there on that park bench, Ralph believed himself not so much rescued as delivered" (46). Luck also favored him with a wife, a green card filed "under the Displaced Persons Act"[33] (84), and a chance for further study: "He, Ralph Chang, was now Doctor Chang" (119)! He then got a job as a tenure-track professor. Things looked different and promising to them now after years of study since the late 1940s. Yet, driven by some strange and irresistible force, Ralph thought, in Marshall Berman's words, that "a sense of self-respect and a clear picture of identity have to be supported by [some] external factors — wealth accumulation and material consumption — the lack of which might cause an 'underdeveloped identity'" (qtd. in Chi-ming Wang 76). To Ralph, having money made a big difference so that he involved himself in a moneymaking scheme to become rich.

To be American, the family also applied for legal citizenship. Luckily, "after nine years in the States, they had all studied up on the three branches of government, and so advanced from permanent residents to citizens" (Jen 123). Enjoying American culture as their own, they watched ball games on TV. One day, they decided to "go Chang-Kees" as they called themselves after the American expression "Yankees." They went to an actual game and found the crowd composed of typical "Yankee fans." There, right on the spot, people "called them names and told them to

go back to their laundry." The Changs responded to such hostility by sitting as impassive as the scoreboard. After that, they stayed home to watch: "More comfortable." "More convenient." "Can see better," they agreed (127-128).

The Changs were excluded from such a pastime as a ballgame even after they became American citizens. Citizenship, in this sense, did not guarantee them equal rights. Earlier, when Ralph was seeking help from Mr. Pinkus, he was told to "go back to China" (40). Now, the Changs were told to go back to their laundry. Such incidents show that America is home to white Americans only. In Theresa's words, in this society a "white person was by definition somebody. Other people needed, across their hearts, one steel rib" (Jen 200). As Lee states: "Rather than reassuring her readers that Americans live in a merit-based society, privy to endless opportunity and capable of being whatever they choose to be, Jen suggests that power inequities between racially and gender-differentiated groups are thickly woven into the fabric of America's national narrative of 'opportunity'" ("Failed Performances of the Nation" 77). With strong evidence, simply put, Jen critiques the American myth of a raceless society.

A Quiet "Counterweight" to a "Fixed Center": Helen and Her Sexist Husband

In an interview with Matsukawa, Jen indicates that even though Ralph fueled the story, she wanted women to be developed characters, not just secondary figures. She says that "the book is about all of them" (117-18). Telling women's stories, Jen challenges sexual constraint in the Chinese tradition by portraying women as sexually

defiant. She says in the interview that, "as a writer, you have to get up the nerve to write about the things that are dangerous." She explains that "Sex in general is of course a bad topic, for a nice girl. Racism. Power. Things you wouldn't talk about in company you're not supposed to talk about either. But a writer is dedicated to truth — a writer's job is to write about these things" (140). The truth about Chinese American women is that they suffer from the double bind of Western and Chinese patriarchy. Portraying Helen as resistant to her husband's sexism and his business friend's sexual seduction, Jen is showing her concern for Chinese American women who struggle for freedom and power against their fate of being subordinated to men.

Helen came to America with Theresa, Ralph's elder sister. She was initially described as "an invalid daughter" of some close friends of Theresa's parents in Shanghai, China. Theresa was sent from her family to keep Helen company for a few months before they came to America together on a student visa. After they arrived, Theresa looked for her brother Ralph and miraculously found him desolate on a New York park bench. Soon after Ralph met Helen, he proposed to marry her. There was no love on the part of the husband, who treated his married life in quite a matter-of-fact way. Jen describes:

> Ralph lay awake whole nights, listening to Helen asleep in the next bed. […] He was more or less used to saying *wife*, to being called *husband*, whatever that meant. He was even used to sex, which he no longer wanted twice a day. Once was enough; already the fumbling had become

memory. An ease had set in. He'd cross to her bed; a touch, and she'd turn over. A few touches more; buttons; then quiet, quiet, listening to be sure they weren't waking his sister. It was easy. Quiet. Quiet. (68)

Being the spoiled child of a family "with tremendous good fortune," Helen used to be an inactive, "doing-nothing" Shanghainese girl" (52, 76). The first few months in America, she still let others do things for her, including the arrangement of her marriage by her friend Theresa. Representing the Chinese ideal of femininity, she was submissive to her husband in many ways. When Ralph made a fuss about the way she breathed, she was good-natured enough to learn from him his breathing technique:

"*This way*," Ralph demonstrated, inhaling, exhaling. "*Even. Do you see? You should breathe this way*."

Helen mimicked him, timidly. "*That one right*?"

"*Right*," pronounced Ralph. "*Again*."

Helen did it again.

"*Again*," he commanded. "*Again*."

[…]

"*No*," said Ralph. "*That wasn't right*."

"*Show me once more*?" She tilted her head, and was pleased to see the pleasure with which Ralph authoritatively obliged. (71)

Although Helen insisted on her "propriety of reticence" (Cheung, *Articulate Silence* 16) in response to her husband's tyranny, Ralph could not stand it: Not long

after that, still troubled by her improper breathing, Ralph yelled at her when she served him soup and tea. They "fought again a few days later, and then again the next week, and then again and again, — until fighting had become the kernel of their married life, the form of intimacy they knew best" (Jen 73). Impatient with Helen's silence, Ralph yelled: "*say something. I want you to say something.*" Helen, however, knew "when *not to continue*" as a polite way of making a point, which infuriated Ralph even more (135).

In American culture women are encouraged to speak their minds. In the Chang household, on the other hand, "silence had teeth" (135). Indeed, silence was Helen's major means of resistance to her husband's hectic behavior. For example, when Ralph was speeding recklessly on the highway, Theresa asked him to slow down. Helen, however, "took a more adult tack — knees and hands clasped together, lips tight, she seemed to be trying to control the situation by going dead rigid" (134). Of course, such a private form of resistance was as ineffective as when she tried to speak. Earlier, she had learned to negotiate a place for herself with the art of conversation American style:

> Helen sighed. At home, room had always been made for her in the conversation; people paused before going on, and looked at her. Here, she had to launch herself into the talking:
>
> "*You know that saying about a wife's ankle*?" she put in softly.
>
> "*What*?" said Ralph.
>
> "*Don't interrupt*," said Theresa. "*She is talking*."

"*I can't hear her*."

"*That saying*," Helen said louder. "*Do you know that saying about a wife's ankle? Being tied to her husband's*?" (65)

In this exchange, "Helen recognizes her new circumstances, makes an effort to adjust her own behavior, and with the help of a bolder woman, learns to assert herself in the conversation" (TuSmith 23).

However, neither silence nor speech worked to improve her situation. Helen had to learn other strategies for establishing a place in the home. Despite her privileged family background, Helen, the girl who had never done anything herself in China, was now learning to cook and perform all kinds of household duties:

> She made her own Chinese pancakes now. She made her own red bean paste, boiling and mashing and frying the beans, then using them to fill buns, which she made also. She made curtains; she made bedspreads; she rewired Ralph's old lamp. She couldn't help but feel proud. Too proud, really — she tried to bind that feeling up — recognizing still, though, that in her own way she was becoming private strength itself. (Jen 76)

Helen discovered a secret — "that working was enjoyable" (76). She thus ventured into other skills. When the family suffered a chill for a couple of days and when maintenance was not easily available, she fixed the boiler herself after she read the instruction manual. Working, as a strategy for Helen and for women in general, "changed the balance of power between the sexes" (Kafka "Cheap, On Sale" 116). Ralph thought it a "miracle!" and Theresa "mused all night, and the next day too,"

feeling “the kind of overwhelming admiration” (Jen 81).

More powerful was Helen’s dream for a happy household: “she could not help but wonder — could a house give life to a family?” (160). Ralph and Theresa were both amazed at how fast she learned about American houses. She read American magazines and newspapers, listened to American radio, and learned quickly: “Extras,” she’d say. “Double garage with separate entrance. Finished basement. Sliding glass doors” (137). She believed that “a top-quality family was growing out of a top-quality house” (159). Not long after Ralph got a job as an assistant professor, Helen managed to get a “special kind of loan,” with the help of her friend, Janis, from a “new program to encourage people to move to the suburbs,” and “they only had to put ten percent down” (154). After they moved in, life did become so much lovelier. The children ran so much; Theresa talked to herself, sometimes loudly; Ralph swung his arms around when he walked, sprawled when he sat. Even his papers had begun to proliferate. As for herself, “she loved the aromas of the dirt, the grass, the flowers; the rain. […] The seasons had their smells too; and indoors, she smelled clean house, soapy children, a medicinal sister-in-law, a sex-strong husband.[34] How amorous Ralph had grown since they moved” (160).

And she breathed more. Or differently, so that for the first time in her life she noticed smells. Helen wondered how this happiness came about: how strange it was that their marriage should have turned so lovely after so many years. She told the family what her mother had told her: that marriage would be like a pot of cold water put on the fire. For years it would be cold and then slowly it would come to a boil.

"*It was like cold water*?" Ralph sounded hurt. "*For years*?" But a few minutes later, the light was out and his outspread hand was in her pajamas, circling. "*Boil, boil*," he whispered. "*Are we boiling now? Eh? Are we boiling*?"

She pressed herself against him, stretching. "*Let's have more children*." (161)

Helen's dream of a happy family came true with years of patience and hard work, which proves the power of the suburban wife hailed in *Time* magazine to be the "keeper of the American Dream" (Linden-Ward and Green, qtd. in Lee, "Gendered Codes" 52). For a while, as Helen hoped, their house did bring them happiness, and, more rewardingly, Ralph's tenure as a professor. Old Chao,[35] now chair of Ralph's department, told them on the phone: "*With everyone going over to space, we really did need someone in straight mechanics*" (Jen 169). The Changs were so overjoyed to hear the news that they celebrated.

Unfortunately, Ralph's happy feelings did not last long because the first class of the new semester was not encouraging. Due to a shortage of space, the class was in a tower: "A tiny room, with exposed pipes." Also, he did not like the students' questions: "'Excuse me, Professor Chang, could you repeat your office hours?' […] 'Excuse me, Professor Chang? Could you repeat …' Could he. A good question. And how many times? Dust on the pipes!" (181, 182). The students seemed to have trouble understanding him. Was it because of the teaching subject or because of his accented English? Anyway, Ralph decided that teaching was no good

for him. He began dreaming “Freedom and justice for all, the greatness of America” (183). Attracted to the idea of self-making, Ralph was “too eager to jump at the chance of fulfilling his image of the American self — an image manufactured by Gold Mountain myths and their accompanying evidence of material wealth” (TuSmith 24). It was, indeed, his blindness and gullibility that enabled Grover to infatuate him with a moneymaking scheme. Once his business started, Ralph thought more of his business than his family. When he had problems, he let out his anger at his wife. Once, he shook her hard and “slammed her against her chair” (Jen 230). Another time, he tossed a brass vase through the living room picture window. Ralph even went so far as to send Helen “sailing, like a human version of their brass vase, out of their bedroom window,” suspicious of Helen’s affair with Grover (262).

Still, Helen was a good-natured wife in the sense that she tried to avoid wars. When she could not, on one occasion, she spilled a life time of talk to resist:

> They had argued in the kitchen a while; upstairs, Helen had turned on the radio to make the noise. “The Children,” she’d warned. “Quiet.” And when he could not keep quiet, she told him many things — that she thought about leaving him, that she wished she had not married him, that she knew herself wanted by other men. (262-63)

The fight between Ralph and Helen really broke them both. Helen’s resistant strategies turned into verbal as well as physical combat as things got worse. Never before had she said words of such force to hurt him: “She called him a failure, a failure and a failure; Ralph hurled her to the ground.” She then threw a hairbrush at

him though it smashed a picture instead of him. Furious, “Ralph’s thumbs hooked themselves around her windpipe” (263).

Ralph’s initial ignorance of his wife and later physical abuse due to his business failure explain why Helen was so easily attracted to Grover. Grover was introduced to the Chang family when their friends Old Chao and his wife tried to match-make him with Theresa. Grover, however, turned his eyes on Helen. To approach Helen, his first step was to seduce Ralph into the money-making scheme. After the business started, Grover had his chance. He brought her pumice stone and cream and nail polish and flowers to please her. Ignored by her husband, Helen enjoyed Grover’s kisses and touches at first: “the considering of him was almost her deepest pleasure” (214). Before long, Grover wanted more of her, his desire growing from under her bra to under her skirt. One day, Helen lay with Grover in the dark, on the sheets of the folded-out love seat. “No,” she said. “No.”

> He lay on top of her, reaching under her skirt.
>
> “Stop.”
>
> “Shh. Do you want to wake up the girls?”
>
> “Ralph,” she called then, softly. Then loudly, “Ralph!” (224)

Grover tried to talk Helen into sex: “You were made to be loved,” referring to the fact that Ralph did not value her. Helen, however, replied: “you don’t love me either” (225). Her choice of “*not to continue*” (135) instigated the turn of events. To take revenge for her ultimate rejection of his sexual advances, Grover, as the owner of the real estate, agreed to Ralph’s proposal of building a secondary floor. A

ruthless swindler, Grover represents the pitfalls of the American Dream in a destructive way: his self-serving scheme involved seducing Ralph's wife and, after he failed to obtain her, he destroyed their business. As a result, just as Helen's affair with Grover was short-lived, her attainment of the American way of life was short-lived. With the business failure and other misfortunes, they had to move out of their house. Jen's portrayal of Helen's rejection of Grover, nevertheless, is significant because, as Lee remarks, "Rather than performing another narrative of American 'success,' Helen reveals what happens to the narrative of masculine self-making without the presumed obedience of women" ("Gendered Codes" 64). Through Helen, Jen portrays women's resistance to the desires of men: Ralph's desire for money and Grover's desire for sex. Quiet as she was, she was her resourceful self, "an instinctive counterweight to Ralph's activity — a fixed center" (Jen 115). What's more, at the darkest moment of their life, she was the one who made the family go: she sold their house, rented a new apartment, and moved the family into it with the help of her friend Janis and her two daughters. With Ralph back to teaching and Theresa waking up from a coma, their life returned to normal after a series of nightmares, and mostly because of the work of Helen.

A "Misfit": Theresa as a Nonconformist

The daughter of an upright scholar and ex-government official, Ralph's sister was named 百晓 (Know-It-All). In the convent school, she'd not only acquired her English name, Theresa, but she'd taken up baseball — with her father's permission —

so that she strolled when she walked, sometimes with her hands in her pockets. Her mother made her quit baseball and sent her for dance lessons to help her attend to her movements. But "Theresa would not care, being almost glad to be all wrong in some sphere" (Jen 48).

The "tomboy" grew up a "misfit" in her relationship with men. When she was arranged to date a Shanghai banker's son in China, she was forced to bring a "shell-pink parasol" and wear "a new pair of silk shoes, a size too small, the idea being not so much to make her feet more acceptable, but to help her maintain a more ladylike step" (49). It was arranged that the young man station himself by a certain park gate as Theresa strolled down a path some hundred feet away, carrying a parasol. Although Theresa had initially resisted the male gaze, she was "seduced" by the silk shoes, a "*modern type*," because she wanted to be seen as a "*capable girl, and so sweet tempered, and so graceful*" (51)! She bravely performed "*her mating dance*," carrying "*her parasol on her left, toward the gate and her fiancé, though the sun inflame[d] her right*" (50). Yet, though the silk shoes were helpful in maintaining a ladylike step, they were so tight that the graceful image of Theresa did not last long because, after a few steps, she could not walk on "as though her toes had been bound with fire-strips" (51). Since it was so difficult to walk in that tiny pair of shoes, she folded up the parasol and used it for a cane! Such a break from traditional ladylike steps, fortunately, freed Theresa from a bad marriage. The report came back that due to an unspecified family crisis, the banker's son would be unable to marry for some years. Later, he was found out to have "run off with his father's concubine," a

shame, a loss of face, and disgrace for his family (52). Figuratively, Theresa broke free from the Chinese constraint of women to move about and gained her individual freedom.

In America, it was arranged by her Chinese friends that Theresa was to meet Grover Ding, a self-made millionaire, who later tricked Ralph into a moneymaking scheme and seduced his wife, Helen. Before the meeting, Theresa bought herself "a new pair of vermilion high heels, the voluptuously curvy kind" that "did not look like shoes so much as some highly adapted life form" (90). Although the red shoes did not match her blue-black *qipao*,[36] bordered in desperate pink, she was so attracted by the glamour of the shoes in the store that they "seemed to pulse, like her own true heart" (91). She bought the red shoes anyway and wore them to the prearranged dinner, not caring "what this short business man thought" (91). Grover, observantly, noticed the shoes: "Nice shoes," he said. "Very darling, indeed," he agreed (93). Yet, placing his hands in his pockets, he winked, a gleam in his eye, at Helen.

In America, high heels symbolize western fashion which, according to Marilyn Alkins, can "facilitate the search for autonomy and empowerment" (qtd. in Chi-ming Wang 87). For Theresa, buying shoes was a matter of personal choice, something she could decide on her own regardless of what other people thought. Her unconventional color and style of dress, not surprisingly, made her a "misfit" for the American-born Grover, whose rejection, however, turned out to be a blessing for Theresa. For, Grover was an evil man: he harassed Theresa and the restaurant waitress before he seduced Helen. His sex acts were, according to Lee, "not inspired

by desire but rather by misogynist contempt" ("Failed Performances of the Nation" 75). In this sense, Theresa was saved from a bad marriage again.

Theresa's wearing American high heels and her Chinese *qipao* implies her ambivalent attitude towards culture. The fact that the American high-heels do not match her Chinese *qipao* symbolizes that her choice of American freedom is not compatible with her Chinese self. Chi-ming Wang comments on this point, arguing that "western fashion is attractive to Theresa because she identifies in it a sense of freedom that will release her, even if only temporarily, from the patriarchal discourse of gracefulness." He says, "For female immigrants like Theresa, fashion is thus a powerful signifier that contains floating contents, appropriated, whenever necessary, to negotiate their identity and to maintain their subjectivity intact in the American scenario" (88). A mediator between the two cultures, Theresa was responsible for her extended family, working hard to help keep the family going at the darkest moments of their life, even after she was dispelled by her brother from his family. At the same time, she sought her individual freedom with Old Chao, the man she dearly loved.

There was a mutual love between Theresa and Old Chao, a professor and chair of her brother's department at the university. Yet, she was quite a "misfit" in their relationship because Old Chao had a family who were their family's friends. Old Chao was attracted to Theresa when he accidentally became her patient, failing to meet his personal physician in the hospital where she happened to be doing her internship. In the brief conversation during the examination, Old Chao fell in love

with Theresa. He intentionally left his briefcase in the examination room so that he could see her again. Theresa and Old Chao, the two old-school Chinese who might be expected to conform to the dignity of their respective roles as physician and department chair, found happiness in each other's company in spite of the fact that Old Chao had a wife.

Theresa believed that Old Chao loved her, and "now, in repayment for his love, in hope of finding a return love for him, she allowed him more. Then more still, surprised at how soft his lips were as he pressed them up and down her neck. She was surprised that the wet point of his tongue at her ear could make her whole body shiver, as though with fever" (173). In Zhou's words, "Theresa begins to be aware of her sexuality and allows herself to experience love and desire in ways that had been socially condemned in China" (156). Influenced by Chinese values, however, Theresa was caught between her love for Old Chao and her concern for his wife Janis. She told Helen: "*Now he wants to marry me. But what about Janis? What about their children? I told him I can't. He said it would be more honest. But the honest thing would be to break it off*" (Jen 267). Such mental struggle shows Theresa's moral conscience in matters of love and sex.

Yet, Old Chao would come visiting Theresa. He couldn't help it and she could not refuse him. As a "misfit" for the Chao family, Theresa, ironically, envisioned an unconventional "family" structure where Old Chao's wife and children would openly share Old Chao with her:

> No more closeting; she could have one part of Old Chao, Janis and the

> children another. The arrangement would be open. Accepted. Why not? In China, there were concubines — not what she wanted to be at all, but which proved human nature capable of different sorts of marriage. Maybe there could be a ceremony whereby someone like her was taken into the family; just thinking of it made her prickle with happiness. (279)

By positioning an alternative to monogamous relationships from Theresa's family-centered perspective, as TuSmith comments, "the novel attempts to define success in terms of neither 'Chinese' nor 'American' conventions, but as a bold questioning of accepted norms" (26). This broader alternative is, of course, not acceptable. Yet, unlike the traditional narrative in which one or the other woman would die, Jen resolves her conflict with Theresa waking up from a coma after she was run over by her brother's car, leaving the readers to figure out what will happen to their affair.

Judged from universal standards of truth, Theresa's affair with Old Chao is "immoral." Yet, feminist analysis would contextualize and justify her behavior. True, Theresa was "bad" for being the lover of someone else's husband. Yet, she was a pitiful figure in that she was badly treated as an unmarried woman in a sexist society. Once, at Ralph's family dinner table, Grover "kissed her on the mouth. Or was it a kiss? Theresa almost did not know; only later did she recollect that what he had actually done was run his tongue over her lips — he'd licked her" (Jen 206). Another time, she was harassed by one of her patients. While she "was taking his history, a glittery-eyed patient grabbed her waist and put his mouth to her ear." All she did was scream so hard that even "the emergency room, whose very livelihood

was disaster, stopped dead still" (153). Even more terrible was the institutional mistreatment of an ethnic woman doctoral student: she had to share a room with men. Someone had explained, with a shrug: "If there were more women …" (147). For Theresa, therefore, it was not the horrors of the emergency room that were hard. It was not the hours and fatigue. What was hardest about training "was having to sleep in that dank, little room the interns all shared, with men." Weary after work, Theresa feared going back to that room: "it was impossible to sleep. It was impossible to think about people witnessing her sleep. What if she moaned, and cried out, and scratched herself, or worse?" (147).

It was at this difficult moment that Old Chao came into Theresa's life. Her affair with Old Chao might have initiated from a need for a friend. Barbara Smith argues that "feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free *all* women … Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but female self-aggrandizement" (qtd. in Yang 148). While French feminist Helene Cixous considers sexual repression a source of women's suffering and calls on women to write "about their sexuality, […] about their eroticization, […] about the adventure of such and such a drive" (885), Elaine Showalter supports the "call for a black feminist aesthetic that would deal with both racial and sexual politics" (244). Showalter distinguishes theories of feminist writing in four models of differences, namely, biological, psychoanalytic, linguistic, and cultural, suggesting that "a theory of culture incorporates ideas about women's body, language, and psyche but it interprets them in relation to the social contexts in which they occur (259). Jen contextualizes

Theresa's behavior in a family and social environment in which she was badly treated. As a result, she needed to be freed from sexist and racist treatment apart from sexual repression. Her freedom was necessary, especially when Old Chao was truly in love with her: he and his wife "were getting divorced" (Jen 284). Although divorce was unthinkable in China at that time, the fact that Theresa and Old Chao found happiness in each other's company "is a positive statement about America" (TuSmith 26). For, even though little was said about the married life of Old Chao, the fact that he claimed divorce as "more honest" (Jen 267) suggested that he valued marriage based on love. His staying in a loveless marriage, therefore, might not in any way make his wife happy. Theresa's role as "the other woman," in this sense, did not seem to demean her. Rather, she deserved sympathy. Defined by convention as a "misfit" in her affair with a married man, she suffered consequences: she was run over by her brother's car and penalized with a coma. As a result, "the image of the unconventional Chinese couple floating in their makeshift pool […] encapsulates a workable version of the American Dream." With such a symbolic image, "the paradox is confirmed that it is when America is not (the immigrants' fantasy of) AMERICA that it is truly and typically American" (TuSmith 26).

Theresa is portrayed as a "misfit" for her brother, too. She was five seven, taller than her brother by three inches: "It was as if in some prenatal rush, they had been dressed in one another's clothes" (Jen 47). Their difference in height was symbolic: Theresa was better than her brother from birth. That was why their father told Yifeng (Ralph) to "please study his older sister. He will please observe

everything she does, and simply copy her" (4). Hands over his ears, the little brother did not like to hear that. His jealousy did not fade as he grew up, not even after he had a family in America. On Theresa's part, she knew her brother so well that she lied about her scholarship: "My scholarship has been cancelled" (81). It was only after Ralph got his degree and found a job as an assistant professor that Theresa told him the truth: "*It wasn't cancelled. I just told you that to make you feel better*." To such a remark, Ralph acknowledged: "*Well, it did make me feel better*" (126).

Such a conversation shows sibling conflict. Jealous as he was, Ralph knew Theresa was useful in monetary terms. Theresa had chipped in for the rent. Soon she was going to have a good salary after doing her internship. Before he decided to buy their suburban house, therefore, Ralph talked to her so that she promised to "chip in on the mortgage payments" (140). Later, as Ralph's business promised a good start, he did not feel like keeping his sister any longer. The chance came when he found out about Theresa's dating Old Chao and right after Grover harassed her at their dinner table. Ralph humiliated her in front of his wife and children: "'Old Sister!' he laughed. 'My *jiejie* [姐姐older sister] with two boyfriends! Kissed everybody! Everybody!'[37] […] 'She kissed everyone,' Ralph told Mona, his daughter. 'You know who she kissed?' […] 'She kissed Uncle Henry [Old Chao], and Uncle Grover too.'" He called Theresa "a rotten egg" and asked her to roll away (208, 209).

Such humiliation drove Theresa out of the new house that she had partly paid for. Colluding with Grover to expel Theresa from the house, as Lee comments, Ralph freed himself from "the vertical constraints — that is, the younger and weaker

escaping the oppression of the primogeniture" ("Gendered Codes" 63). Now that Ralph's business failed and his wife was in the hospital after he threw her out of their bedroom window, they had trouble paying their bills. Ralph called Old Chao, telling him that he was "*having difficulties*" so that Theresa moved back. She told herself that "It was her duty." […] "She was in many ways Americanized, but in this respect she was Chinese still — when family marched, she fell in step" (Jen 265). Lee comments on this point: "Failing the national, and implicitly masculine, narrative of success, then, results in a return to women — a literal return, in the case of Theresa's homecoming." Her return, however, "does not imply a traditional notion of women's victory, such as their moving into the protagonist role. Rather, it renders visible the hidden violence to them" ("Gendered Codes" 66).

True, Theresa's return to the Chang household did not signify a recovered security in the home. Instead, Ralph continued to wreak havoc on the family. In a troubled state of mind after he learned about his wife's affair with Grover, he ran over his sister with his car after he came back from his dangerous ride with his wife. Jen ends her novel with Theresa waking up from her coma. But, does her recovery make up for Ralph's failed dreams? One thing, however, is positive: Ralph woke up from his American Dream. Before the accident, he did not know why he was irresistibly attracted to Grover and how he was alienated from his wife and sister. After all the nightmares in which he not only lost his property but almost his family, he realized how ephemeral and shallow his dream of success had been. The waking up of Ralph and his family from their different versions of the American Dream is

meaningful to the reader in that "if the immigrant's fantasy of America can be dispelled, then there would be fewer disillusioned Americans" (TuSmith 25).

Summary

After the 1949 Communist Revolution in China, about five thousand Chinese students and young professionals were living in the United States. Global political events and Cold War politics created a category of political refugees that enabled five thousand Chinese college and graduate students, predominantly from the upper and middle classes, to seek political asylum in the States (Lee, "Gendered Codes" 46, Timothy Fong 26, Sucheng Chan 141). This group of refugees worked their way to professional careers and became middle-class Americans. In *Typical American*, the protagonists, Ralph, his wife, Helen, and his sister, Theresa, belonged to this category of students from China's most elite, educated, and wealthy families. By chance, they were granted their permanent resident visa, applied for American citizenship, and became American citizens. In their process of being Americanized, they became "Typical Americans." Jen uses *Typical American* as the title of her novel because she "perceptively and brilliantly challenges readers to reexamine their definitions of home, family, the American dream, and, of course, what it is to be a 'typical American'" (Matsukawa 112).

To present the Changs' upward mobility into the American middle class and subsequent falls, Jen uses irony as her major narrative strategy, an influence from Jane Austen, who is best known for irony in her masterpiece *Pride and Prejudice*

(1813). Acknowledging such influence, Jen declares that there is "this irony" within the book which has something to do with the phrase "typical American" (qtd. in Matsukawa 114). The irony, Jen explains, lies in that "'Typical American' is a phrase that the Changs used to describe people who are not them, and yet by the end of the book, of course, they become 'typical Americans' themselves" (114).

The term "Typical American" is generally associated with white Americans. The Changs understood the phrase in exactly this sense when they first came. Only, they viewed "typical Americans" in a very negative way. For them, "Typical American no-good," "Typical American don't know-how-to-get- along," "Typical American just want-to-be-the-center-of-things," "typical American no-morals!", "Typical American just-dumb!" (67), "typical American no-manners" (76), "typical American unreliable!" (78), "typical American wasteful" (103), and "typical American no-consideration-for-other-people" (170). A reverse racism is obvious: the Changs were critical of everything American and were sure that "they wouldn't 'become wild' here in America, where there was 'no one to control them'" (67).

Ironically, by the end of the book, the Changs became "typical Americans" themselves. As they believed that America holds out the promise that a person can do anything, they mocked certain aspects of Americanness, while simultaneously struggling day and night to conform to what they each think of as being "typical American" (Kafka "Cheap, On Sale" 107). In doing so, they were getting lost. Telling Ralph's story of striving for the American Dream of material success, Jen conveys that "The promise of American capital, which is the promise of progressive

improvement, of change and accumulation, is set against the limits of human ability" (Lim, "Immigration and Diaspora" 301).

Telling the Changs' stories, Jen also expresses her race theme well. In many cases, the Changs were discriminated against in their process of being Americanized. Ralph was called a liar and told to go back to China by his professor for no good reason. Helen could not find any job due to the color of her skin, and Theresa was mistreated by the hospital by being forced to sleep in the same room with male interns. Incredible was the fact that, in such a small thing as watching a ballgame, the Changs were told to go back to their laundry. Each story of racial hostility, though poignant, is told with irony and humor. Yet, Jen claims that America belongs to every one and every race because she wants to convey that every citizen is rightfully American, regardless of the color of his/her skin. Such an idea is symbolically expressed in the character of Theresa, who "yearns for a multi-color world, as represented by the medley of fashion(able) colors and styles" (Chi-ming Wang 88). Her wearing of incompatible colors and styles symbolizes cultural integration even though cultures are different. The idea of cultural integration has important theoretical and practical implications in that people of different ethnic, cultural and national origins should be treated equally.

The other narrative strategy is that "Jen does not situate her protagonists in Chinatown, signaling a departure from conventional immigrant narratives" (Huang 66). The Changs are thus removed from the clutches of parental demands and strict Chinatown societal codes. Being in America, Ralph had not only left China as a

geographical space, but also broken with his father's world of family values. As Chi-ming Wang comments, "His Chinese cultural cultivation is no longer an asset, neither is his Chinese manner of dealing [with] things" (82). And "even Theresa and Helen become as 'wild' as the 'typical Americans' they used to mock and criticize" (Simal 144). They became adventurous in their dreams of American freedom. Penalizing all three characters for becoming "wild," — Ralph suffering from financial losses, his wife and sister from bodily injuries — Jen implies that, in order to succeed, Asian Americans must continually combine and recombine elements from both their birth culture of China and their adopted culture of America.

The third narrative strategy is Jen's use of the Chinese language, which is one of her ways to convey cultural integration. The Changs thought in Chinese and used the Chinese language whenever they were in trouble. By "*xiang-ban-fa"* (27) — (想办法), to think of a way, — Ralph managed to survive and succeed in America from a graduate student to a tenured professor. When his business failed, "he took down all the signs [inspirational quotes] in his study, and in their place put up a new piece of paper that read, *Bai lian cheng gang* [百炼成钢], — a hundred smeltings become steel" (Jen 246). In many ways, the Changs' sufferings — their ups and downs in America — only reconfirmed the value of the Chinese expression: "*chi de ku zhong ku, fang wei ren shang ren* [吃得苦中苦，方为人上人] — eat the bitterest of the bitter, become the highest of the high" (288). In times of trouble, these Chinese elements came back to them "not merely in the form of cultural restoration and empowerment but also as means of redefining America and typical American" (Chi-ming Wang 85).

The fact that Ralph replaced the American inspirational quotes with Chinese expressions symbolizes his growing bicultural awareness: he had to make and remake himself in the new culture. The "gradual formation of his self-identities signifies a struggle between two cultures, a negotiating process of taking in and giving up that leads to a resultant synthesis of the two [cultures]" (79).

Last but not least, Jen's narrative strategy differs from Kingston and Ng in that she tells the story of a first generation immigrant family in a third person narrative — unlike the other two authors, whose stories are told in the first person singular by the second generation daughter narrators. Jen thinks that she "had a lot of energy around the older generation and then the children's point of view became a problem because there was so much happening that they couldn't know" (qtd. in Matsukawa 117). As a result, unlike Kingston and Ng who portray mostly the conflicts between parents and daughters, there is little parent-daughter relationship in *Typical American*. Instead, Jen presents the relationship between husband and wife and between brother and sister. Presenting husband-wife and sibling relationships is significant in two major aspects. First, by telling the stories of women in relation to men, Jen presents her gender theme. Both Ralph's wife, Helen, and his sister, Theresa, were involved in an affair against the accepted norm of society. Such a portrayal critiques the Oriental stereotype of Asian/Chinese American women being the silent, passive, and victimized Other. Jen contextualizes their behavior in their specific cultural and social context against the sexist treatment of them within and outside the home. Their behavior can be understood as resistance to sexual oppression. Second,

presenting a sibling relationship, Jen is trying to negotiate the tensions between the self and family, by means of which she is conveying the idea of cultural integration, which is, of course, a very difficult task. As Chi-ming Wang puts it:

> Although cultural difference can be integrated in the pursuit of capitalist expansion and social success as exemplified by the collective cultural imaginary, namely, the American dream, to make the two different identities — Chinese immigrant and typical American — compatible and harmonious does require a longer process of self-interrogation, mediation, and negotiations through mass commodities and other cultural media. (93)

The negotiation of cultures, in this sense, needs bicultural awareness, without which one goes astray. As TuSmith puts it, "Jen's contemporary version of characters in pursuit of the American Dream exposes the emotional traps and false promises inherent in the self-made myth for immigrant Americans of Asian descent" (21). Jen claims that she is telling an "American story" because, as a Chinese American writer, she wants to claim America as belonging to all American citizens regardless of the color of their skin. What Chinese Americans should understand is that they need both Chinese and American cultural values to succeed in pursuing their American dreams. For, as Chinese Americans under hostile social conditions, their struggle for the American Dream is more painstaking and costly than other Americans because of their racial, cultural, and national origin. It is, therefore, not wise of them to give up their birth culture of China in their adopted country of America in order to be "Typical Americans."

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: DREAMS FOR THE FUTURE

Summary of Chapters

This study of the American Dream as experienced by the Chinese in America has covered a historical period of about one hundred and fifty years and focuses on texts written since 1977. I have discussed literary texts by three Chinese American women writers, namely, Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* (1977), Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* (1993) and Gish Jen's *Typical American* (1991). I have first explored the lives of earlier Chinese immigrants who worked in farming, railroad construction, and laundry businesses from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, whose dreams was to get rich quickly and return to their home country. After World War II when Chinese exclusion laws were repealed, families were allowed to enter. To stay for the sake of their children, married men dreamed to own a home and become owner of a small business because they could only find jobs as cooks, laundrymen, and menial laborers. Married men in all three texts dreamed of gaining material wealth though for different needs. While Ed in *China Men* and Leon in *Bone* needed money to survive, Ralph in *Typical American* needed money to succeed — to advance from an "underdeveloped identity" (Berman, qtd. in Chi-Ming Wang 76). Yet, all three failed in their business dreams because of hostile political, social, and economic conditions.

Since social forces of race and class intertwine with gender in hegemonic formations, I have looked at how gender is presented by the three authors. Except in Chapter II, in which I have studied male sexuality, I have paid attention to women's

needs in their struggle for survival, for freedom and power in all three texts. For masculine studies, I have discussed how, through such "single husbands" as Great Grandfather, Grandfather and Father, Kingston recovers their masculinity. Kingston rejects the traditional Eastern/Western models of manhood that link masculinity with violence, racism, and sexism, and favors a new kind of masculinity. She suggests that men can be heroic, resourceful, tender, caring and loving at the same time.

All three authors present female gender/sexuality by telling women's stories. Both Mama in *China Men* and Mah in *Bone* worked hard to keep the family together while enduring their husband's sexist treatment. The stories of Ralph's wife and his elder sister in *Typical American* are different from the mothers in the previous two texts. They came to America in the late 1940s as students and dreamed to move upward into the middle and upper middle classes in the 1950s during which the novel is set. Both Helen and Theresa had to cope with men's sexist treatment of them in their struggle for freedom and power. Through Helen and Theresa who are involved in adultery, I have addressed female sexuality.

Telling men's as well as women's stories, the authors have presented Chinese Americans as resistant to racial, class, and gender oppressions. In doing so, they have reconstructed Chinese American identities and have rewritten Chinese American history. At the same time, they have expressed their dreams for the future: all three authors express their desires for bridging cultures, races, and nations with a transnational consciousness. Kingston, in particular, expresses her wish for world peace in her chapter about her brother who has experienced the nightmares of the

Vietnam War. In *China Men* and *Bone*, both Kingston and Ng serve as the mediators of cultures as daughter narrators, while, in *Typical American*, such mediation is expressed through the elder sister who wears dresses in incompatible colors, suggesting that, in this multicultural world, people of color demand and deserve equal treatment.

Implications of the Research

The study of the American Dream as experienced by the Chinese has important theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the portrayal of Chinese immigrants in all three texts as resistant to political, racial, economic, and gender oppressions critiques the Oriental stereotype of the Chinese as the silent, passive, and victimized Other. In his *Orientalism*, Edward Said critiques the hegemonic relationship between Occident and Orient, arguing that "Orientalism is more particularly valuable as a sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient than it is as a veridic discourse about the Orient" (6). Said thinks that the dominance and power over the Orient are complicated historical facts that no European literature can truthfully reflect, meaning that the Orient is misrepresented in such literature. Said, therefore, claims a minority discourse to truthfully reflect the Orient.

Likewise, Gayatri Spivak and Chandra Mohanty raise the Third World women issue in their critique of the Western feminist scholarship, which, to them, either silences the Third World women or misrepresents them. As is quoted in Chapter One, Spivak raises her title question, "Can the subaltern speak?" and answers that "the subaltern woman will be as mute as ever" (90). She means that the subaltern as a

female cannot be heard or read, thus cannot speak. Mohanty critiques the hegemonic Western scholarship in terms of its misrepresentation in the sense of essentialism, the homogeneity ofwomen. Mohanty suggests that any careful study of these different and diverse third world women has to take their historical and socio-political backgrounds into consideration to help empower these women. For these reasons, Spivak and Mohanty call for a minority women's discourse by bringing them into feminist studies. The three texts under study are such contributions in that the authors break Chinese American silence of both men and women against multiple oppressions. My study of Chinese American men and women as resistant to the Oriental stereotypes of them being the docile, passive, and victimized other, in this sense, contributes to minority's and minority women's discourses claimed by Asian cultural critics.

Second, in reviewing Chinese American history, I have studied how Chinese American men and women resist sexual subjugation. Lisa Lowe critiques immigrant laws that confine Asian Americans first to male labor camps and later in laundries and restaurants so that they are stereotyped as being emasculated. Although Kingston reasserts Chinese American manhood via her forefathers, except for King-kok Cheung and a couple of others, not much critical study has been done to redefine Chinese American masculinity. Addressing how the forefathers in *China Men* resisted sexual oppression, I have contributed to the field of masculine studies in Chinese American literature and criticism. As for the study of women, a lot of research has been done on women's silence, speech, and mother-daughter relationships. Exploring the husband-wife relationship in all three texts, I have addressed female sexuality, which is not much

studied in feminist analysis of Chinese American literature. Dulci Fu's two marriages and her being attracted to her boss Tommie in *Bone* and Helen's and Theresa's adulteries in *Typical American* challenge the patriarchal traditions of both cultures. Contextualizing women's behavior in opposition to the binary opposition between right and wrong in matters of morality, I have deconstructed female sexuality in the study of women in relation to men. This is significant because, unlike many other Chinese American feminist studies in which men are excluded, I have included men in the study of Chinese American women.

Third, looking back at about one hundred and fifty years of Chinese American history, I have addressed how Chinese immigrants were exploited in the hegemonic racial and class formations where they hardly earned enough to make a living. Earlier in the second half of the nineteenth century, as Hong Kingston's *China Men* illustrates, Chinese workers worked in farming and railroad construction in male labor camps. In the twentieth century, men and women worked in restaurants, laundries, fisheries or garment industries. For example, the parents in Kingston's and Ng's texts from the early to the late twentieth century were doing laboring jobs. Even Ralph, a graduate student in *Typical American*, had to work as a butcher, killing chickens. For a century and a half, poverty struck all three families so that it is one of the shared themes in all three texts. The exposure of poverty is significant in that it counters the superficial mainstream representation of successful "model minority" families that often make the suffering of the poor, working class Chinese invisible. My study from the point of view of social class, in a way, addresses the previous lack of class analysis.

In terms of class analysis, Peter Kwong calls for a study of internal conflicts in Chinatowns. In his article, "Asian American Studies Needs Class Analysis," Kwong argues that "The application of class analysis is vital to understanding our community" (81). For various reasons, however, there are very few contemporary community studies. Most of the studies on Chinatowns, instead, "are historical and they avoid internal class analysis" although, as was already quoted in Chapter I, "class formation within the Asian American community is very much a reality" (78, 77). Specifically, "we are seeing more and more Asian workers being exploited by their co-ethnics" (77). True, in *China Men*, *Bone* and *Typical American*, Ed, Leon, and Ralph were all cheated by their ethnic business partners. Women were caught in the same work relationship. Brave Orchid in *China Men*, who had a degree in China, worked as a servant for a Chinese family who could not read. Dulci Fu in *Bone* worked as a seamstress whose boss was Chinese. Contextualizing internal class conflicts in the larger American society in which the Chinese suffered from political, economic, and sexual oppressions, I have contributed to the study of internal class conflicts.

"Space, time, custom, change, language itself," Robert Lee argues, "time and again refute any simple binary or divide" (115). In the study of the texts, I have deconstructed the binary or divide in the following aspects. First, I have deconstructed the opposition between traditional and contemporary views of masculinity in the discussion of *China Men* in which Great Grandfather Bak Goong and Grandfather Ah Goong are both heroic and loving characters. Second, I have deconstructed the binary view of women. Brave Orchid, for example, is a woman warrior with both masculine

and feminine powers, working in and outside the home to help support the family. I have also deconstructed female sexuality in the analysis of characters such as Dulci in *Bone* and Helen and Theresa in *Typical American*. Dulci, Helen, and Theresa were all involved in extramarital affairs although such affairs were strictly forbidden in Chinese culture. Applying Butler's theory that "the binary view of gender relations, i.e. the two clear-cut groups of men and women is too simple" and that gender is socially constructed (1), I have deconstructed their sexual behavior in the society in which they suffered doubly. Their sexual behaviors can be understood as women's resistance to sexism and as their struggle for freedom and power.

In one more important way, I have deconstructed the binary opposition between cultures by favoring cultural integration. For a long while in Asian American literary and cultural criticism, there has been a debate between Frank Chin and the *Aiiieeeee!* editors' masculinist nationalism and nativism and voices of women writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan whose "urge to claim America has allowed some writers to rupture a racist and patriarchal definition of an American national identity" (Cheung, "Re-viewing Asian American Literary Studies" 9). In their "competing impulses of claiming America," they have suggested maintaining ties with Asia, which challenges what Robert Lee calls the "simple binary or divide" (115). Like the daughter narrator in both *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* in which Maxine experiences a transformation after which she reconciles with her mother and father, the daughter narrator Leila in *Bone* also reconciles with her parents by means of a transformation after she looks into her middle sister's suicide. Ralph in *Typical*

American also goes through a transformation. He wakes up from his dream after he fails in his business, especially after he runs over his sister with his speeding car in his desperate state of mind after he finds out about his wife's adulterous affair. He reconciles with his sister who is the mediator of the two cultures. The daughter narrators in the first two texts and the protagonist in the third seemed to deny their Chinese selves in the beginning, but after some costly experiences, they came to terms with their cultural roots. Their stories convey that it is important for Chinese Americans to find their in-between space in the current world of America. My analysis from such a point of view contributes to the understanding of forging connections between cultures.

Such a bicultural awareness is expressive of Edward Said's integrated view of cultural resistance. In his introduction to *Culture and Imperialism*, Said states that "the narratives of emancipation in their strongest form were also the narratives of *integration* not separation" (xxvi). He means that one is to see the colonial history, to reconceive the history, and finally to negotiate the history against a separatist nationalism. Said suggests that cultures should strive for mutual respect rather than feeling hostile toward each other. By critiquing the patriarchal tradition in their home culture of China and the power of the dominant culture over Other cultures in their host country of America, the authors have expressed the themes of both cultural resistance and cultural integration. Crossing cultural, gender, and linguistic boundaries, the authors have broken the literary tradition by manipulating time and space in a postmodern style to serve their grand themes of bridging differences. In

many ways, the texts under study express the authors' wish to communicate well from one culture to another, from parents to daughters, from men to women.

Practically, I have examined the Chinese American Dream in regard to the Chinese immigrants' struggle for survival and success in their pursuit of material gain and individual freedom. The American Dream has a lot to do with American national character. Influenced by Emerson and Thoreau's Transcendentalist philosophy, many Americans believe that people are provided with equal opportunities so that they can achieve their dreams as long as they work hard. Yet, more often than not, they become disillusioned because they cannot help but fall into the pitfalls of the Dream. When I studied Chinese Americans pursuing their dreams of material success and individual freedom, I not only demonstrated that the Chinese are persistent in their efforts, but also advised that they have to be watchful for the pitfalls of the Dream. All three texts show that, in the still racist America, it is more difficult for Chinese Americans than white Americans to achieve their dreams. To survive and succeed, they had better be aware of their ethnic cultural roots in their process of being Americanized. Such bicultural awareness is important to understand because, as the authors suggest, those who ignore one culture or the other are doomed. That is, they are more likely to fall into the pitfalls of the American Dream.

Secondly, the dreams of Chinese immigrants/Chinese Americans going wrong reflect the political history of Chinese exclusion and social injustices because of racial, ethnic, and cultural reasons mediated through immigrant laws, and it is important for future generations to understand this part of the history. Early Chinese immigrants

were separated from their families for several decades, especially after the first Chinese exclusion law was enacted in 1882, which was extended in 1892 and again in 1904. In 1924, another law was enacted against immigration of Chinese women which further separated Chinese men from their families. It was not until the Chinese exclusionary laws were repealed in 1943 that women were allowed to enter as non-quota immigrants. Some consequences of the laws, were "the institutionalization of racism and racial discrimination, the further exploitation of Asian immigrants, and the destruction of Asian family systems and traditional gender and familial roles" (Duncan 40). Also, because of laws that denied the Chinese legal citizenship and citizenship rights, the Chinese lived in fear of deportation. As is exemplified in all three texts, the fear of being deported haunted Chinese American families across the centuries. Chinese exclusionary laws, though repealed, still affect the lives of new Chinese immigrants, including those on non-immigrant visa status. Most international students on school campuses find no jobs in offices like American students. The exposure of Chinese exclusory history, therefore, will not only help future generations to learn about the past, but also help them think about ways of improving the future.

Suggestions for Future Research

In the study of selected texts, I have argued that racial, class, and gender formations mediated by immigrant laws have prevented the Chinese from achieving their dreams. The Chinese American dreams and nightmares as presented in the selected texts expose social injustices because of which the Chinese suffer from poverty

and other misfortunes. What is special about the authors' presentation of the Chinese American family's dreams in the twentieth century is that the authors situate the families close to other Chinese so that their business fails in collaboration with other ethnic Chinese partners. Except for Luk Ong from Peru, Leon's business partner in *Bone*, business partners in the other two texts are completely Chinese by origin. Although I have addressed such internal ethnic conflicts, more internal class analysis is needed, especially in matters of how such conflicts can be understood in relation to the larger American political and social context.

In the study of the selected texts, I have discussed the difficult family relationships in the hostile racial, social, and economic conditions. Although a lot of study has been done on the mother-daughter relationship, scant attention has been paid to father-daughter and husband-wife relationships, much less on sibling relationships. I have, therefore, explored such family relationships, for example, between fathers and daughters in *China Men* and *Bone*, between husbands and wives in all three texts, between brother and sister in *Typical American*, and between sisters in *Bone*. Yet, since not much research has been done on these relationships, more study is needed, especially on husband-wife relationship. In such a relationship, female sexuality is a challenging issue. In particular, when wives are involved in adultery, they challenge patriarchal traditions of both cultures, especially the Chinese culture. More in-depth analysis is necessary in the discussion of female sexuality.

Also, there is a need for exploring homosexuality. Rachel Lee argues that Jen's reiterative plots that seem to feature Ralph as protagonist in *Typical American*,

run the parallel track of Helen and Theresa's unnarratable story of female intimacy and suppressed lesbian desires (67). Lee thinks that Helen's having an affair with the crook Grover reinforces compulsory heterosexuality (69). Also, the homosocial bonding between Leon and Ong in *Bone* and Ralph and Grover in *Typical American* in their respective laundry and restaurant business collaborations needs distinct analysis. Commenting on Ralph and Grover, Lee states that their homo-social bonding "takes on a similar misogynist cast as the two men commune through the objectification of women" (Lee 61). True, neither Leon in *Bone* nor Ralph in *Typical American* treat their women well. To some extent, I agree with Lee's argument of lesbian desires being suppressed. In addition, I notice that the homo-social bonding of men in both *Bone* and *Typical American* involves emotional attachment. Still, I am not fully convinced. I, therefore, suggest that Lee's argument needs supporting studies.

I have also looked at the racial and class forces in the hegemonic formation of gender in terms of the emasculation of Chinese men and how they resist being emasculated. Specifically, I have discussed the stories of the forefathers in *China Men* concerning how they reassert their masculinity and how Kingston recovers their manhood. Jianhui Wang notices that "[o]f the Asian American critics who focus on Asian American masculinity studies, Cheung, […] is the most important one" (143). Critiquing the binary view of traditional and contemporary masculine traits, Cheung has suggested the possibility of reconstructing alternative Chinese male identities that challenge the heroic tradition favored by Frank Chin and the *Aiiieeeee!* editors. In

this respect, except for Cheung's and a couple of other critics' studies, Chinese American manhood is still in need of further exploration and redefinition. Based on Cheung's belief that "Masculinity, like femininity, is multiple," ("Of Men and Men," qtd. in Jianhui Wang 144), I suggest that characters such as Ed in *China Men*, Leon in *Bone* and Ralph in *Typical American* need further analysis in terms of their complicated masculinity. They oppose the universal binary view of good and evil in the way they treat their families. Contextualizing their behaviors from a deconstructive point of view, I think that these characters deserve sympathy in the hostile land of America.

To conclude, in this historical study of the American Dream experienced by Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans, I have paid attention to the authors' transnational consciousness when they present their themes of cultural resistance and cultural integration. They convey that "the social articulation of differences, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation" (Bhabha 2). In this on-going negotiation, the authors have shown a strong desire to claim America. Meanwhile, they have shown a renewed interest in their Asian legacy. Such a middle ground position, as was already indicated in Chapter I, is reflective of Edward Said's integrative view of human community and human liberation against a "separatist nationalism" (*Culture and Imperialism* 217). Said's integrative view opens the space for "cross-race" and "cross-national" possibilities (Lowe 35), which help the Chinese in America not only resist cultural domination, but also come to

terms with their cultural roots. In many ways, the authors are forging connections between Asia and Asian America "at the crossroads of history and literature, bridging the home and the world" (Bhabha 13). Their transnational consciousness, in this sense, embodies the dreams of world peace at both domestic and global levels. Also, negotiating ethnics and cultures via the politics of differences, the authors convey that people should be treated equally regardless of their race, gender, class, and national origin. They have, in fact, expressed the important dreams shared by Cultural Studies critics: the dreams of social equity and human emancipation. I wish such lofty dreams come true.

Notes:

Chapter II

[1] Māui (Maui) is the great hero of Polynesian mythology. Stories about his exploits are told in nearly every Polynesian land. Maui is regarded as a demi-god, or as fully divine; in some places, he is regarded as merely human. *Wikipedia*, retrieved from IUP, Indiana, PA. 16 Feb. 2009. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maui>.

[2] Hina (literally "girl") is the name of several different goddesses and women in Polynesian mythology. Hina is often associated with the moon and with death. *Wikipedia*, retrieved from IUP, Indiana, PA. 16 Feb. 2009. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hina_(goddess)>.

[3] Bak Goong (伯公) in Cantonese means Great Grandfather. The word Goong or Gong (公) means grandfather. Ah Goong (阿公) means Grandfather; Grandfather's brothers are often called in numbers. Sahm Goong (三公) is Third Grandfather; Say Goong（四公), Fourth Grandfather, etc.

[4] Kingston uses the word "demons" to refer to the cruelty of white Americans in *China Men;* she uses "ghost" in *The Woman Warrior* to refer to the haunting feature of people or events.

[5] Beijing opera or Peking opera is a form of traditional Chinese theatre called 京剧 in Chinese. Peking opera combines music, vocal performance, mime, dance and acrobatics. It arose in the late 18th century and became fully developed and recognized by the mid-19th century. The form was extremely popular in the Qing Dynasty court and has come to be regarded as one of the cultural treasures of China. *Wikipedia*, retrieved from IUP, Indiana, PA. 1 March 2009. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peking_opera>.

[6] Guan Yu or Kuan Yu (关羽), Zhang Fei or Chang Fei (张飞), and Liu Bei or Liu Pei (刘备), swore an oath of brotherhood known as "the Oath of the Peach Garden" (桃源三结义). The original goal of the Oath was to protect the Han Dynasty. This act bound the three key men of the future Shu-Han Kingdom of China and is alluded to as a symbol of fraternal loyalty. Guan Yu and Zhang Fei were military generals while Liu Bei was a general, warlord, and later the founding emperor of Shu Han, known as the ideal benevolent, humane ruler who cared for his people and picked good advisors. He advocated the Confucian set of moral values, such as loyalty and compassion. *Wikipedia*, retrieved from IUP, Indiana, PA. 10 March 2009. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oath_of_the_Peach_Garden>.

[7] As a military general in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (三国演义), Guan Yu (关羽), also called Guan Gong or spelt Guan Goong (关公) in Cantonese *pinyin*, was deified an omnipotent God: God of War, God of Fortune, God of Literature, and God of Agriculture, worshipped by many Asians at home and abroad. (*Baidu* encyclopedia, trans. retrieved from IUP, Indiana PA. 6 Nov. 2009. <http://baike.baidu.com/view/2275.htm#8_2>.

[8] *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* by Luo Guanzhong or Lo Kuan-chung (罗贯中) in the 14th century is a Chinese historical novel based upon events in the turbulent years near the end of the Han Dynasty and the Three Kingdoms era of China, starting in 169 and ending with the reunification of the land in 280. This was the period when China was divided into separate states of Wei (魏), Shu (蜀) and Wu (吴). The novel, with a grand total of 800,000 words and nearly a thousand characters and 120 chapters, is acclaimed as one of the four great classical novels of Chinese literature. *Wikipedia*, retrieved from IUP, Indiana, PA. 10 March 2009. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romance_of_the_Three_Kingdoms>.

[9] The San Francisco earthquake in April 1906 destroyed much of the city, but it opened the door to illegal Chinese immigration. As it destroyed birth and citizenship records, Chinese immigrant who managed to convince the American government that he was a citizen tended to sell legal paperwork to a young man eager to migrate to the United States. The young man thus became "a paper son." See Chapter III for a more detailed discussion of "paper son" history.

[10] The expression “Women can hold half the sky” (妇女能顶半边天) was first used by Chairman Mao Zedong during the Great Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) to refer to women who are as able as men. Kingston’s father uses this term in his written communication with his daughter, which he must have heard from China.

[11] In traditional Chinese culture, red was the proper color for a wedding. Although young people wear white today following the Western tradition, it was not acceptable to wear white in Kingston’s mother’s time.

[12] To kowtow is to bow by kneeling down with one’s head touching the ground. Kowtow expresses lots of meanings: respect, gratitude, worship, loyalty, apology, plea for forgiveness, and for not guilty, etc. Traditionally, people kowtow to their ancestors to make wishes that their spirits would protect them. Today, young boys kowtow to their living grandparents on Chinese New Year’s Eve to wish them long life. In return, they receive money as a gift from them.

A bride does not kowtow to her husband. Instead, bride and groom bow during the wedding ceremony. Usually, they bow in three rounds: first, to Heaven and Earth three times; second, to their parents three times; and lastly, to each other three times. To Heaven and Earth and to their parents, they express gratitude. To themselves, they express appreciation and commitments.

[13] Wu Zetian 武则天 (635-705), often referred to as Tianhou (天后) during the Tang Dynasty or Empress Consort Wu (武后) in later times, was the only female in Chinese history to rule as emperor. As the facto ruler of China first through her husband and her sons from 665-690, not unprecedented in Chinese history, she then broke all precedents when she found her own dynasty in 690, the Zhou (interrupting the Tang Dynasty), and ruled personally from 690 to 705. Her rise and reign has been criticized harshly by Confucian historians but has been viewed under a different light after the 1950s. *Wikipedia*, retrieved from IUP, Indiana, PA. 19 November 2009. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wu_Zetian>.

[14] Zhou Yu or Chou Yu (周瑜, 175-210) was a famous and one of the most capable military strategists for Sun Ce (孙策) and his successor Sun Quan (孙权) during the Three Kingdoms era, the turbulent years leading to the end of Han Dynasty in China. *Wikipedia*, retrieved from IUP, Indiana, PA. 10 March 2009. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zhou_Yu>. *Wikipedia*, retrieved from IUP, Indiana, PA. 10 March 2009.

[15] Zhuge Liang or Chuko Liang (诸葛亮 181–234) was recognized as the greatest and most accomplished strategist during the Three Kingdoms era of China. His name – even his surname Zhuge alone – has become synonymous with intelligence and strategies in Chinese culture. *Wikipedia*, retrieved from IUP, Indiana, PA. 10 March 2009. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zhu_Geliang>.

[16] The *Thirty-Six Stratagems* (三十六计) was often misnamed as strategies to illustrate a series of *stratagems* used in politics and war, as well as in civil interaction. “*Stratagem*” is a neutral word to clarify that the intended meaning is to reach a goal in an unorthodox way, mostly by hiding one's intent and doing the unexpected. *Wikipedia*, retrieved from IUP, Indiana, PA. 10 March 2009 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thirty-Six_Stratagems>.

[17] It is not fair but it is a Chinese tradition that a one-month birthday party is held for boys but not for girls. Relatives, such as grandparents, uncles and aunts or close friends are invited to dinner. Nowadays, such tradition is no longer observed, especially in large cities.

[18] “The Four Valuable Things” is part of the translation of the phrase “文房四宝” whose full translation is “Four Valuable Things in the Study.” The Four Valuable Things are: paper, ink, ink stone and brush. These things are valuable because, with them, one learns to write to be able to take the Imperial Examination which will, in many cases, secure them a government position.

[19] Brush is the calligraphy brush pen. In ancient China, scholars write with such a brush. To use it, there should be ink. Ancient scholars make ink with ink stone, which Kingston calls inkslab.

[20] For Chinese calligraphy of annotations by Hong Kingston's father, see King-kok Cheung's book *Articulate Silences* published by Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993. His annotations on Page 116 read: "和平幸福小虧何足介懷，三缄其口避免许多麻烦"— a very poetic expression of a popular Chinese understanding of silence. The poem is translated as "When peace and happiness reign, allow for small losses; when lips are sealed, much trouble is avoided." On Page 117, there is a picture of the title page of a Chinese translation of *China Men*, bearing annotations by Kingston's father, describing Kingston's American birth place and place of ancestral origin.

[21] The Han Dynasty (汉朝 Hàn Cháo, 202 BCE – 220 CE) was the second imperial dynasty of China, preceded by the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE) and succeeded by the Three Kingdoms (220–265 CE). It was founded by the peasant rebel leader Liu Bang (刘邦), known posthumously as Emperor Gaozu of Han (汉高祖). *Wikipedia*, retrieved from IUP, Indiana, PA. 10 March 2009 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Han_Dynasty>.

Chapter III

[22] In China, when a wife is having an affair, her husband is said to be wearing a green hat.

[23] The Chinese assign meanings to numbers. Nine is a lucky number. Ninety-nine is thus very lucky.

[24] The Eight Immortals (八仙; *Bāxiān* also the *Pa-hsien*), a group of legendary immortals, fairies, or transcendents) in Chinese mythology, are said to live on Penglai Mountain-Island in East China. Each Immortal's power can be transferred to a tool of power (法器) that can give life or destroy evil. Most of the immortals are said to have been born in the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD) or Song Dynasty (960-1279 AD). They are revered by the Taoists and are also a popular element in the secular Chinese culture. Daoism refers to a variety of related philosophical and religious traditions and concepts that have influenced East Asia for over two thousand years and some have spread to the West. (*Wikipedia*, retrieved from IUP, Indiana, PA. 26 May. 2009. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baxian> and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taoist>).

[25] The Goddess of Mercy, Guanyin (观音 guān yīn or kuan-yin) shortened name for Guanshi'yin (观世音 *guānshì yīn* or *kuan-shih yin*) is the bodhisattva (菩萨), usually a female, associated with compassion. The name means observing the sounds (or cries) of the world. Commonly known in the West as the Goddess of Mercy, Guanyin is venerated by East Asian Buddhists. Buddhism is a family of beliefs and practices considered to be an Eastern religion and is based on the teachings attributed to what is commonly known as "The Buddha" (the Awakened One), who was born in what is today Nepal. Guanyin is also revered by Chinese Taoists as an Immortal. (*Wikipedia*, retrieved from IUP, Indiana, PA. 27 May. 2009. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ Goddess_of_ Mercy> and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ Buddhism>).

[26] See Note 7, Chapter II.

[27] God of Books may refer to Confucius (孔夫子 Kǒng Fūzǐ or K'ung-fu-tzu), "Master Kong" (551 BC–479 BC), who was a Chinese thinker and social philosopher. His teachings and philosophy have deeply influenced Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese thought and life. His philosophy emphasized personal and governmental morality, correctness of social relationships, justice and sincerity. Confucius' thoughts have been developed into a system of philosophy known as Confucianism (儒家). (*Wikipedia*, retrieved from IUP, Indiana, PA. 27 May. 2009. <http://en.wikipedia.org/ wiki/Confucius>).

[28] "Red Guards" were mostly high school students who organized themselves as revolutionaries to guard Chairman Mao Zedong during the "Great Cultural Revolution" (1966-1976). They wore a red band on their left arms with the characters 红卫兵 (Red Guard) on it. In the early years of the "Revolution," Mao called on the Red Guards to destroy temples that were supposed to be associated with superstition, such as Buddhist and Taoist temples, including Confucius's Temples. "Red Guards" destroyed such temples in answer to Chairman Mao's call. Mao's slogan was: "break with superstition and liberate the mind." (破除迷信，解放思想)

[29] Confucius's temples were built in China in honor of the great and influential Chinese thinker and philosopher. See Note 27.

[30] "The Great Teacher" refers either to Confucius, "Master Kong," who was a Chinese thinker and social philosopher or Chairman Mao Zedong, who was acclaimed to be the Great Teacher, Great Leader, Great Military Commander, and the Great "Pilot." He was worshipped like God in the early years of the "Great Cultural Revolution" (1966-1976). See Note 27 on Confucius.

[31] When Nina came home for Ona's funeral, she was wearing red, which was a festive color for a wedding. The proper colors for a funeral in Chinese tradition were white and black. Nowadays, other dark colors are acceptable.

[32] Leon heard that fluorescent lights were better than bulbs and suggested them for Mah's Baby Store. Because of Ona's death, however, he told Mason that his concentration was gone, and that something disconnected between his mind and his heart.

Chapter IV

[33] The Displaced Persons Act (1948), a kind of U.S. law to admit displaced persons or refugees, was originally an act to authorize for a limited period of time the admission into the United States of certain European displaced persons for permanent residence, and for other purposes. Under this act, according to the Chronology from LEAP (Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics), Congress also gave permanent resident status to 3,500 Chinese visitors, seamen, and students caught here because of the Chinese civil war. *San FranciscoChinatown.com* and *askasia.com* retrieved from IUP, Indiana, PA. 20 July. 2009. <http://www.sanfranciscochinatown.com/ history/1948displacedpersonsact.htm> and <http://www.askasia.org/images/teachers /documents/11.doc>.

[34] Jen's portrayal of Ralph as a sexually strong husband is an example to show that Chinamen are not emasculated. In Chapter II, I've discussed Kingston's critique of the Oriental stereotypes of China Men being emasculated in some detail.

[35] Old Chao is a literal translation of the Chinese/Cantonese Addressee. In China, people are often addressed with Old, Big, or Little before their family names according to their age. Sometimes, however, "Old" does not mean old, but older. For example, Old Chao is what younger classmates call him because he is older. In *Typical American*, there is also Xiao Lou (Little Lou), a younger graduate student, as another example.

[36] *Qipao* (旗袍 qípáo) is a body-hugging one-piece Chinese dress for women. It is known in English as a mandarin gown. The stylish and often tight-fitting *qipao* most often associated with today was created in the 1920s in Shanghai and was made fashionable by socialites and upper class women. *Wikipedia*, retrieved from IUP, Indiana, PA. 17 July. 2009. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cheongsam>.

[37] In Chinese culture, people, including husband and wife, do not kiss openly before other people. Ralph humiliates Theresa also because it is considered a shame for a woman to be kissed by more than one man.

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