Cultural Translation and Representation of Mother-Daughter Relationships: A Study of Works by Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, Fae Myenne Ng, and Mei Ng

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Mother-daughter relationships have long been a significant motif in Chinese American women writers' texts because, in a cultural community like Chinatown, family is indeed an important unit of the society: family is responsible for generational cultural inheritance. While literary texts reflect writers' personal voices, readers try to understand them in their own contexts or generalize them to understand them in a specific context, for example, that of Chinese immigrant families. It follows, then, that the mother-daughter relationship in those texts is not only a private relationship or a source of female empowerment, which is often discussed in feminist readings of novels by Chinese American women, but also an intensely charged cultural construct, and thus the relationship takes on additional meanings in each narrative. In particular, images of Chinese mother-daughter relationships, such as a Tiger mom and her rebellious daughter, tend to be limited and naturalized. Although the prominence of the motif makes it a frequent topic of academic analyses, such scholarship usually reads it through a feminist lens that frames the mother-daughter relationship as a source of female solidarity and empowerment. Often, however, the relationship also signifies other issues that each writer or daughter figure wants to address and therefore reveals alternative readings. This dissertation will discuss four novels by Chinese American woman writers and investigate the representation and function of mother-daughter relationships in each text in order to show ways in which these critique

American racism, negotiate and modify American and Chinese American readers' expectations, and problematize stereotypes of Chinese Americans.

The dissertation will demonstrate how the daughter heroines and the narrators seek to revise their relationships with their mothers through cultural translation in their own ways. First, this chapter will discuss the issue of representation of mother-daughter relationships in literary texts and introduce cultural translation as a theoretical approach to analyze them. Chapter 2 analyzes *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1976), a classic of Chinese American women writers' texts by Maxine Hong Kingston, and shows how the heroine translates her Chinatown experience into an American context and becomes a speaking subject in mainstream American society. Chapter 3 features another classic, Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), and examines the strategies through which one of the heroines revises and reconceives her mother's Chinese words and mysterious stories to unshackle herself from a guilty conscience for having betrayed her mother. Chapter 4 discusses Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* (1993) and shows how daughter Leila successfully negotiates her desire to leave Chinatown and thereby discover a sense of independence from her mother. Chapter 5 analyzes Mei Ng's *Eating Chinese Food Naked* (1998) and reveals how the heroine, Ruby, copes with her blossoming queerness and her experience as the Chinese American daughter of an immigrant mother through the language of food. The last chapter will consider the four novels in a broader discussion of mother-daughter relationships

and cultural translation in order to show their significance across the four narratives.

Chinese American Women Writers

Cultural authenticity is a recurring issue not only in literary criticism, but also among general readers or audiences of all kinds of artistic representation. Culture is neither a neutral nor transparent medium, and especially when a culture is prefaced by another country's name, the phrase signals a highly regulated and institutionalized political construct. For individuals whose identity is based on the cultural communities to which they are supposed to belong, external evaluation of their culture has considerable effects upon their self-evaluation. Novels by Chinese American women writers tellingly raise controversies about this issue, such as the classic Kingston-Chin controversy which centers on Maxine Hong Kingston's popular "autobiography," *The Woman Warrior*. The novel has been attacked by critics of her own Chinese American community for its portrayal of barbarian Chinese and Chinatown cultures, distortion of the well-known Chinese patriotic heroine, and malicious mistranslation of Chinese words, while enjoying record sales as well as celebration and praises from (white) feminists and (white) readers. A similar attack recurred when Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* was published. Tan's first novel was celebrated among feminists, enjoyed record sales, and was later turned into a Hollywood motion picture. Even though the two novels differ in literary approaches – Kingston's is rather experimental in form while Tan's is traditional and

easy to read – they received similar criticisms of self-Orientalism.

Analyzing Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* in terms of culture requires an interrogation of how the text has been treated both inside and outside the history of her community. An exhaustive observation of Asian American literary history is not in my intent. Rather, this discussion will trace how Asian, especially Chinese American, women writers have cleared the way into American literature, centering Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* because it is the most groundbreaking book in Asian American literary history despite or all because of the controversy it has caused. This is not to privilege the book as a representative of Asian American novels, but to illuminate what is so problematic about ethnic American writings in general. Elaine H. Kim argues that, for "literate Asian immigrants," autobiographies were the first significant entry to American letters dominated by whites (25). Kim begins the history of Asian American literature with images of Asians that are already embedded in American culture, and then follows a path of Asian immigrants' literature and that of the second-generation. Pardee Lowe and Jade Snow Wong are the first of the second-generation women writers to be published, and in terms of popularity, Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945) is often picked up because it is "the best known and most successful book" (Kim 59). Still, as Sau-ling Cynthia Wong remarks, the two autobiographies function in part "as guided Chinatown tour[s]," and the writers function as "cultural interpreters who can obtain a measure of recognition from whites for the insider's insight

they can offer" ("Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour" 35, 41). *Fifth Chinese Daughter* was also important for Kingston, who was in her childhood looking for a literary voice for Asian American women in English-written letters once she learned English and the vast body of literature was accessible to her (Huntley, *Maxine Hong Kingston* 7). For Kingston, Jade Snow Wong was the only Chinese literary mother in American letters, which was dominated by whites. As other influential books in her childhood, she names Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, in which, however, Chinese people are represented only as oddities, such as "this funny-looking little Chinaman" (Huntley, *Kingston* 7). This episode tells how the self-consciousness of a Chinese American girl could be problematic: she encounters the voice of a girl just like her that simultaneously mocks her Asian heritage. Her sensational debut, *The Woman Warrior*, is usually considered as a bildungsroman of a Chinese American girl in Chinatown, which describes how, in the racist world of American society, she confronts and overcomes her self-hatred of Chineseness by retelling her mother's and other women relatives' stories. Considering Kingston's traumatic experience with English letters, however, the heroine's redemptive happy ending should be read carefully because it is not clear if the heroine really overcomes her experience of racism in the end. I will question the readings that claim a happy ending in the following chapter.

The Woman Warrior sparked controversy in the Asian American, especially Chinese American, literary community for its portrayal of patriarchal and barbarian old China and

Chinatown while being supported by and celebrated in feminist readings of the novel for its exposure of gender discrimination in China and Chinatown. At the heart of the dispute is cultural authenticity, or whether one is culturally qualified to write about certain topics. For example, Kingston's critics claim that she falsified well-known traditional stories and intentionally mistranslated common idioms. As Sau-ling Wong writes, however, "the main reason the critics attack *The Woman Warrior* is not that it is insufficiently factual but that it is insufficiently fictional" ("Autobiography" 38). Kingston's Chinese stories and references to Chinese culture are not entirely made up, but instead are based on facts such as the exact number of the year in the No Name Woman story, which indicates the publication date of the immigration law that prohibited Chinese women's entry into America. In Kingston, such falsification or distortion of Chinese culture is not exoticization to insinuate into white readers' favor, but tentatively to interpret Chinese culture on American soil (Wong, "Autobiography" 44-46). While using autobiography to represent one's ethnic community is not objectionable in principle, as a result of works by Pardee Lowe or Jade Snow Wong, the novels came to be regarded as anthropological reports on Chinese Americans. Images and motifs addressed in the writings could be easily appropriated to label the Chinese Americans they represent, to categorize them, and effectively to tame them in American culture by recycling the myth of the model minority. Ironically, the critics' demand for more authentic stories to publicize the reality of Chinese Americans threatens to elide cultural difference and

confine them to the narrow set of ready-made images of Asian Americans.

Although Kingston's novel is controversial, the author's success opened up a new horizon of Asian American literature. Beyond just autobiography, such writing can experiment aesthetically and also appeal to mainstream readers. Kingston received many awards and prizes, such as, to name a few, a National Book Award for nonfiction, a National Education Association Award, and a *Mademoiselle* Magazine Award, while enjoying critical praises (Huntley, *Kingston* 17-18). In 1991, it was the most taught text in American universities across many disciplines, and it has inspired countless papers and articles (Shirley Geok-lin Lim 4, Huntley, *Kingston* 28). Nonetheless, the next significant writers of Asian American novels after Kingston did not arrive until thirteen years later. Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* was as sensational as *The Woman Warrior* because she was "entirely unknown to the literary world" (Wong, "Sugar Sisterhood" 83). The novel made sales records and received numerous awards and prizes while earning praises from scholars and literary peers (Wong, "Sugar Sisterhood" 83). Although Tan's novel's rise to prominence may appear similar to the trajectory of Kingston's *The Woman Warrior,* but in Tan's case, Tan already had her literary Chinese godmother, that is, Kingston. Tan said she "devoured it [*The Woman Warrior*] in one sitting…. I felt amazed and proud that somebody could have written this" (Talbot 8). Tan's is a positive model of a Chinese American woman writer, one who does not play down to white readers, but openly criticizes the racist society of America. In addition,

their circumstances were different; the American readers were ready to read Chinese American women's novels (Ho, *In Her Mother's House* 44). In 1993, the book's success resulted in its adaptation as a major motion picture directed by Wayne Wang, who was already celebrated for his *Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart* (1985), a Chinatown-themed movie. Despite being small-budgeted, the film was a hit.

Sau-ling Wong situates Tan's success in Chinese American women writers' matrilineage discourse, which can be traced back even before Kingston (Wong, "Sugar Sisterhood" 85-88). Matrilineage was then something desperately sought by some Western feminists after Adrienne Rich's famous remark in *Of Woman Born* (1976), a contemporary of *The Woman Warrior*, which claims that "cathexis between mother and daughter – essential, distorted, misused – is the great unwritten story" (225). In search of that mother-daughter story, Marianne Hirsch in *The Mother/Daughter Plot* concludes that stories told by both mother and daughter are needed (199). In 1989, the same year as this conclusion, *The Joy Luck Club* was published, featuring interior monologues of its four pairs of mothers and daughters. This coincidence of the publication years (*Of Woman Born* and *The Woman Warrior*, and *The Mother/Daughter Plot* and *The Joy Luck Club*) indicates that the success of the two Chinese American women writers is not a singular incident, but could be situated in a broader feminist movement and the history of Asian American literature.

After Kingston and Tan, however, it appears that no other Chinese American women

writers equal in popularity are yet following in their steps. As Wong points out, in the debut year of Tan's book, there were other books by famous Asian American writers such as Cynthia Kadohata and even Kingston. These were celebrated and discussed in academic contexts, but they did not reach the mainstream success of Tan. Even the most recent generation, which includes Fae Myenne Ng or Yiyun Li, is not as successful. I will consider this later, but before looking into it, we also should survey why Western feminists made studious efforts to find matrilineage in letters because *The Woman Warrior* received wide, welcoming attention from white feminists, and her popularity is not a singular phenomenon.

Female Duality and Mother-Daughter Relationships

The issue of mother-daughter relationships in Western letters was clearly raised in 1929 when Virginia Woolf wrote in *A Room of One's Own*, "For we think back through our mothers if we are women. It is useless to go to the great men writers for help, however much one may go to them for pleasure" (Woolf). However, it seems that it was not until Adrienne Rich declared the need to discover mother-daughter themed stories hidden in history in her *Of Woman Born* (1976) that feminists took up their ardent research and creative activities at a grand scale. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's groundbreaking feminist reading study, *Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), explores the absence of literary mother for 19th-century women writers, polarized representation of women as "angels" or "monsters," anxiety about

writing, insanity as creative source, and meager escape from patriarchal hegemony. Although their analysis can be read as a female answer to Harold Bloom's male writers' anxiety, the discussion also exposes women writers' duality as well as the conflict between mother and daughter. In the analysis of the famous story of Snow White, they discover a conflicting relationship between a mother with a death mask and a daughter who tries to claim her life through writing (27-28). This conflict is made up by the voice of the mirror, which is actually the voice of the king (the paternal representative of a patriarchal system) demanding beauty based on youth. In other words, the tension between them arises from the age, or generational gap, that differentiates them. Gilbert and Gubar treat this conflict as one that characterizes women's social position generally, but it is also possible to say that the conflict is actually between women in different generations, mother and daughter (54). Conflict between women or "catfights," a misogynist stereotype, is represented in the function of the mirror: pit women against each other so that they will not fight against the mirror itself. What they need is, therefore, to free themselves from the mirror that prevents cooperation and mutual understanding between women. However, even in the process of self-emancipation, the king's voice is not easily overcome because it is transmitted as the mother's. It is so persistent that it is eventually internalized in the daughter's psyche, as if the mother is undead.[1]

As *Snow White* symbolizes, mother-daughter stories in Western literature are often represented as distorted fantasies; the relationship is often depicted as unhealthy and one that

could ruin the daughter's life (e.g., An obsessive mother, such as Miss Havisham in Dickens's *Great Expectations* or the doomed mother-daughter relationship in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*). In the following argument, Gilbert and Gubar analyze the relationship in Western literary world in terms of women writers. First they ask if the queen's voice is really the king's (66) because the father's voice often breaks the mother-daughter relationship and controls them separately. In Harold Bloom's argument about the anxiety of influence, or a literary Oedipus plot, a male poet's victory over a paternal precursor is enabled by patricide and women mainly function as muses who interact with the poet. Applying this theory to women writers, some inevitable questions arise: do women writers attempt matricide, and is a muse male or female? Instead of answering these questions, Gilbert and Gubar look into women writers' anxiety as revealed in their works or letters. They conclude that their anxiety is caused not by the absence of their female precursors, but by agoraphobia, which stems from their life-long confinement in the house (82). Even if women could write, such characters become, by the novels' endings, abhorrent to themselves and, thereby, demonstrate the schizophrenic outcome of their self-hatred (98). On the other hand, women writers utilize female duality, often depicted as the cunning of the feminine double tongue, which permits them to write their own vision in texts in disguise while modifying genres such as the bildungsroman (104, 105). Women writers deploy duality to express their intentions while hiding them in the form of art. These tactics, however, also suggest that they remain in the

very constraints they seek to escape, especially within their own texts (114), which is encapsulated in the metaphor of the house or the maternal figures that have locked them in (126). Further, they argue, because of the lack of literary mothers, maternal figures in women writers' texts are often marginalized and not portrayed seriously or else are totally absent (usually dead by the beginning of the narrative).

Marianne Hirsch addresses this widespread use of literary mothers for women writers in *Mother/Daughter Plot*, a text inspired by *Of Woman Born* (1976) that examines conventional motherhood and her own experience of being mother in academic and poetic ways.[2] Hirsch's study ranges from Greek tragedies to contemporary novels and analyzes Victorian novels by women writers based on the Greek tragedy of Clytemnestra and Electra. Clytemnestra murders her husband Agamemnon out of revenge because he sacrifices their daughter, but in return she is murdered by her own daughter, who is obedient to Agamemnon. The mother is robbed of her right to anger, and the daughter's matricide is justified just because she represents and exercises the father's power by proxy. Hirsch finds this pattern of the obedient daughter who marginalizes her own mother in Jane Austen's *Emma* and George Eliot's *Dániel Derónda*. In these novels as well as many 19th-century women writer's texts, mothers are portrayed as abusive, ridiculous, hysterical, and silenced—and as an obstacle to the daughters' growth. They are also mystified or absent in such forms as sickness or death. In some cases, the plots are even set in motion by the mother's absence, which implies that

women writers commit matricide in the process of becoming ideal obedient daughters in the Victorian patriarchal system, a space of narrow confinement that limits their identities to categories of “angel” or “monster” and alters, in some cases perverts, the bond between mother and daughter.

The denial of the maternal figures is found in the women writers’ self-realization plots, in which a heroine’s maturity is enabled only through male figures’ assistance and consolation. The male figures are often mentors to the daughters and facilitate the action while other female characters are marginalized as subsidiary tools in the plot. A daughter, in such narratives, is eventually led to the same goal and condition as her mother, that is, marriage because she does not know her mother’s story. As a result, she ends up in the same confinement, robbed of the sense of freedom and self which she was led to believe marriage would have granted. The heroines in *Emma* or *Jane Eyre* usually do not have children, as if to deny these uncomfortable realizations. In this way, Victorian mother-daughter plots repeat Clytemnestra’s end: the denial of the mother’s subjectivity.

In order to challenge these doomed women’s plots, Hirsch extracts another plot from Greek tragedies that recognizes maternal subjectivity, that is, a story of Demeter and Persephone. The story tells of and justifies the fury of the mother Demeter, who is deprived of her daughter Persephone by Hades, the god of the underworld. The story concludes that Persephone comes and goes between her mother and Hades who is now her husband. The

maternal figure is not erased from the plot. By avoiding the traditional matricidal plot, the daughter matures without privileged male figures; she merely navigates between Demeter and Hades. Using this model, Hirsch analyzes Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. The novel's mysterious ending, represented by a line in the character Lily's painting, symbolizes equivocality, a vision she gains right after completing the painting that enables her to maintain simultaneous contradictions such as "presence and absence, connection and disconnection" (*Mother/Daughter Plot* 114), as well as the presence of the mother and the father, Mrs. and Mr. Ramsay. The vision is contradicted, thus it will be remade eternally. This plot differs from that of the Victorian novels by retaining the maternal figure even while the paternal figure remains in the daughter's world.

Hirsch further articulates a kind of maternal subjectivity that embraces more agency and connection than that arising from the nostalgic mother figures recalled by daughters. According to Hirsch, since the 1970s, the father's absence became a premise of some women's stories, and these shifted trajectories from reconciliation with the male imagination to expressions of women's loyal sentiment to women (129). Daughters separate from mothers through childbirth and try to escape from the victimized womanhood represented by mothers. They try to realize both their daughterly side and maternal side in order to gain a new perspective. This conceptual frame intentionally challenges assumptions arising from Freudian theories of womanhood and the feminine, which argue that women must resent and

maintain distance from their mothers so that they can gain freedom and self-determination. However, as Hirsch reveals, the position a daughter attains by leaving her mother is one among men—isolated and unequal—and as a result she is excluded from other women. Some feminists even argue that women have to privilege their relationships with women more than those with men in order to begin to generate a sense of equilibrium. This bond between women is, however, fraught with danger if the daughter's experience is simply self-centered, in which case women's subjectivity is based on the hollow exchange that weighs the daughter's individual experience against ignorance of the mother's experience. Nonetheless, this tendency is characteristic of the feminism of the time, which mainly focused on a daughterly perspective. It was their mothers whom feminists needed to attack because they had been engaged in and represented the conventions they were trying to destroy. Such tensions are expressed, for example, in Luce Irigaray's daughter's monologue, "And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other." It exemplifies a daughter's accusation against an abusive mother who feeds her daughter on "milk" and "ice" (60, 66). Hirsch argues that feminists' elision of the maternal perspective effectively prohibits women from empowering themselves through the combination of self-expression and motherhood, depletes the mother's privilege, and ultimately colludes with patriarchal systems. From this perspective, sisterhood, often considered a feminist ideal, is just another system that pushes mothers back into the closet. Hirsch's study thus shows how difficult it is to construct a new mother-daughter or women's

narrative, which requires both mothers' and daughters' voices, and produce a complex matrix of female consciousness.

These intense and widespread efforts to delete mothers from narratives stem from fear of the mother, matrophobia, which is a fear of the maternal inside and not a fear of actually becoming one's mother. Feminism had excluded experiences and consciousness beyond control, avoided connection between motherhood and sexuality or ignored fear of power in order to conceal women's unstable position and body. Hirsch proposes anger as a way to break this vicious chain (169): Demeter and Clytemnestra's anger returns here. Anger is a subject's intense claim and expression of her existence; the mothers' anger is directed toward the muteness and silence imposed on them by their daughters and may function to inscribe their stories as mothers. Hirsch analyzes Toni Morrison's *Sula* as an example of maternal anger. The novel describes a destructive, anti-maternal mother who even commits infanticide. African American women writers including Morrison or Alice Walker often depict mothers with women's literary tradition in mind. It is possible to say that African American women, unlike Western, white women, have their own female traditions in many forms of artistic activities such as quilt making, black gospel, dance or storytelling, in which networks of women of different generations are nurtured and preserved. Those women figures situated in women's social bonds and familial generations know their mothers' stories and could provide constructive futures, in contrast to the matricidal daughters.

Gilbert and Gubar, together with Hirsch, explore not only women writers' long battle for their own voices, but also the emerging voices of mother figures who were once marginalized as abusive or ridiculous and now have their own narratives. It is interesting that these marginalized voices of mothers are uttered from another marginalized group, that is, from African American women writers' texts. In a way, their texts play a subversive role in the current of the mainstream white Canon texts, and this is why Chinese American women writers' works have become significant in the remaking of women's narratives by the inclusion of maternal voices.[3] The mother-daughter relationships in Chinese American women's novels, especially *The Woman Warrior* and *The Joy Luck Club*, differ from those in the Western novels because the daughter heroines often have opportunities to learn their mothers' stories. An inherent tension remains, though: because of the difference in their cultural backgrounds and languages, it is difficult for the daughters to understand their mothers' intentions completely.

The mother-daughter relationships to be analyzed not only empower the women characters, but also become the culturally repressive space in which the heroines are compelled to perform filial duties as self-sacrificing Chinese daughters. Through the mother-daughter relationships, every novel tells a different story. Because the relationship is a nexus of the two cultures and a possible vessel for historical memories conveyed through generations, it is not only a personal relationship, but also a significant motif. Thus,

mother-daughter relationships should not be read from only the perspective of feminist readings. Rather the representation of the relationship informs us about characters' subject formation in terms of historical and cultural influences. It is a space in which the dynamics of those influences interplay. It is also a space that connects the mother and daughter with the outer world or reality, from which Chinese American women are often excluded as silenced or hyper-sexualized objects of Orientalism. The mother-daughter relationship also tends to be perceived as a mysterious female bond from which men are excluded. The relationship in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, which is tragic but still glamorously depicted, is a good example. The mysteriousness is often misread fantasy. In fantasy, readers can exercise their own imagination and interpretation so that the story becomes accessible across cultures. In this way, fantasy could work as a sign of universality that could appeal to the readers around the world, but when it comes to issues specific to Chinese American women, it obscures the issues and separates them from the reality they live in. By contrast, in these four novels, mother-daughter relationships reveal how political and historical factors affect or culturally bind the mothers and daughters. If their pieces of the memories that reveal the political and historical sides of the novels are not ignored or depoliticized as universal problems, the relationships can tell more about the characters such as why they behave in a certain way. These readings can reveal the heroine's specific social issues behind universal stories of bildungsroman and help understand their unique realities.

Translational Narrative

The heroines of the Chinese American women writers' novels addressed in the following chapters also suffer anxiety of authorship like 19th-century women writers, but they do so in another way: writing about the mother and her stories is always an act of translation in both literal and cultural ways. The heroine in this case, like those of Victorian women writers, looks for her own voice while writing as a mere translator, but she does so as a daughter of her mother and not as a father's obedient daughter. Moreover, Chinese American women writers have access not only to their own Chinese mother's stories, but also to those Western literary mothers whom Victorian women writers longed for and even imagined. How do these options function in their texts? Whereas Gilbert and Gubar once pointed out female duality in the monolingual society of Victorian era, these Chinese American women writers have to struggle in the bilingual world of their ethnic and American societies while translating their mothers' stories and their own experience into English and American contexts, in anxiety of gaining their own writers' voices. In what way, then, does translation function in their narratives?

The heroines help their parents as interpreters, and translate their mothers' Chinese stories, or speak/write in English what is spoken in Chinese, even though they do not always translate in terms of languages or cultures. Given the numerous moments in which the

narratives dramatize the heroines in the process of translation, it is possible to say that the four novels in question are, as a whole, translational texts. Especially when they are acutely conscious of cultural differences and try to come to terms with them, their narratives assume a culturally translational character. They face the issue of translation in defining their own ethnic and racial experience and their mothers' Chinese stories in American contexts as well as in their daily lives. For them, translation consists in not only revelatory, aesthetic moments, but also everyday acts, situations so ordinary (though painful) that such movement across—language, culture, history—becomes their way of thinking, to see things from multiple perspectives at one time. As an example, Leila in *Bone* thinks twice after buying a suede shoulder bag with money her stepfather gave her to buy it. She wonders if the bag is too American, but she does not return it after all (183). Leila considers what her Chinese stepfather would think of her for wanting such a Western product, but eventually puts her own desire and her stepfather's kindness before this cultural sensitivity. I would like to call this kind of culturally conscious narrative "translational narrative." It is not only a translation in terms of languages (after all, the novels are all originally written in English), but also in terms of cultures. It captures the moments of cultural translation and negotiation. As the heroine of *The Woman Warrior* recalls her aunt who killed herself in China, she not only tries to tell this Chinese story as it is, but also presents different possible plots to make it fit into American context. Other American daughters of *The Joy Luck Club* routinely try to see what

their Chinese mothers really mean with their words. Considering these frequent instances of cultural negotiation in the heroines' narratives, the four novels can be termed culturally translational texts.

The daughters' translational everyday lives nurture their tendency to see things from different perspectives. When they take the mothers' stories into their own stories, they translate Chinese stories into American ones to be interpreted in American contexts. They negotiate with American culture and decide what can be translated and what cannot. This negotiatory process generates their own narratives. They also experiment with the stories' space of possibility, which may not be intended by the original tellers, who in this case are often the heroines' mothers. Translational narrative inherently risks misunderstanding and miscommunication but also gives opportunities for the heroines to create their own version of the original Chinese stories and gain their own voices. Their translations do not always succeed in finding adequate equivalents in English, and indeed, often fail. The heroines have to translate their experience or their present life in order to make decisions and survive in American society, but sometimes they (particularly the heroine of *The Woman Warrior*) are unsuccessful in their efforts. What such "failures" expose is thus both the possibility and the limit of cultural translation as a literary motif.

Cultural Translation

Analyzing relationships between immigrant mothers and their native daughters requires a dissection of cultural difference. What is transferred from motherland to America, what is lost or transformed in the process, and how do mothers and daughters recognize and deal with the cultural loss and transformation? It may be argued that this process involves translation in cultural terms because the novels in question offer only text to communicate these subtle cultural transactions. This transmission occurs, however, not entirely in a lexical sense, but also in a cultural sense because what we construe from sentences includes exact meanings, as well as implications, which are based in authors' cultural backgrounds. In this way, cultural translation permits authors to expose and attempt to reconcile the generational, geographical, and linguistic differences between mother and daughter. For the purpose of this dissertation, this is what cultural translation refers to; it covers all the translational activities that are exposed and animated by cultural difference. Although the term "translation" in this argument refers to lexical translation, even lexical translation is included in "cultural translation" because, for the heroines, each Chinese word evokes its own memory, history, and personal story, and those pieces of information cannot be separated from the words that express them.

The heroines deal with two cultures and try to understand them in relationship to one another: Chinese culture in an American context and vice versa. Their attempts can be considered translation in cultural terms. There is another reason why I stick to the term

"cultural." Translation studies or theory aims to explain what translation entails or what the nature of translation as a phenomenon is, but its analysis usually is based on the concepts of Source Language and Target Language, which refer to a language used in an original text and the language in the translated one (Bassnett-McGuire 2). However, Source Language is rarely seen in the novels. In cases where narrators explain some Chinese words, these are already anglicized, and readers cannot witness the process of actual, lexical translation. As literary critic Martha J. Cutter points out, conversations between mother and daughter, which are probably conducted in Chinese, are also written in English, and there is no possibility for the readers to see how the daughters actually translated each word into English (Cutter 5). Therefore, although cultural translation may partly overlap translation studies, the approach is insufficient for understanding the nature and function of translation in these narratives because the narratives problematize the very conception of "source" and "target" as fixed positions situated a priori to the storytelling.

One promising approach may be drawn from an argument of Homi Bhabha, an advocate of cultural translation, to explore its theoretical possibility. Since Bhabha approaches translation "through an ambivalence at the point of enunciation of a politics" (36), his theory is based on "ambivalence," which basically represents "neither the one nor the other but something else besides" (37). Such resistance to explicitly situating meaning implies translation itself because translated texts are neither the originals, nor quite different

ones, but something new. For him, however, such ambivalence is something rare and which is often encountered as temporality and negotiation (38, 56). He proposes translation as a strategy by means of which minority groups or individuals to talk back to hegemonic discourse because it transfers meanings and derails the authority of the originals. Bhabha also reveals that translation produces some problematic, equivocal effects. For example, he refers to translation as a "transference of meaning" while also connecting it to processes that both connect and betray meaning, as in "translation and displacement" (39) implying uprooting, painful experience in the process of trying to extend fully fleshed out meaning across language and culture. Since his theories are usually mentioned as a positive interpretation of natives' behaviors, this disturbing side of translation is often ignored. Nonetheless, where there is ambiguity, interpretation is not fixed, leaving room for re-imagination and intervention.

Translation as cultural translation needs one more piece to be utilized as a literary theory. Cutter analyzes literary texts using translation as a literary motif, or in her term, as a trope. She writes, "Translation entwines these [separate] languages in a syncretic linguistic whole that is still (and always) divided by conga…. The conga as a dance form can appropriate aspects of past and present … it can incorporate cultural forms and then evolve again into something new" (2). She proposes a formula, "A+B=C" (2) as a process and result of translation and emphasizes its ability to produce new meanings. However, the words,

"syncretic" and "whole," imply that a translated language becomes an independent and static entity per se even if it is "divided." This contradicts her agreement with Pérez Firmat, who says that cultural "collision/collusion" displays "an intricate equilibrium," which does not always mean stasis (2). This contradiction seems to stem from her emphasis on subsidiary newness, which is regarded as a positive factor of translation. The novelty in question is one of language and identity. She writes, "a new mode of voice, language or subjectivity may be formulated that meshes – but also exceeds – prior subjectivities or languages" (3). It is possible to say that overestimation and idealization of an ethnic culture that permeates post-colonial theories and scholars lurks here. The issue should be noted because this idealization of ethnic minorities' daily acts could easily lead to marginalization of their culture, a tendency frequently found in post-colonial theories, which are often applied in readings of ethnic American literature.

E. San Juan, Jr. criticizes post-colonial theorists' idealization, mystification and fetishization of ethnic culture. He writes:

> Indeterminacy, interruption of the signifying chain, aporia, endless displacements, translations, and negotiations characterize postcolonial literary theory and practice…. In the discursive realm of floating signifiers and the language metaphor, the objective asymmetry of power and resources between hegemonic blocs and subaltern groups (racialized minorities in the metropoles

> and in the “third world”) disappears, as well as the attendant conflicts….Clearly this fixation on the manifestations of “unevenness” has undergone fetishization, divorced from its concrete social determinations. What postcolonial theory (Bhabha’s practice is replicated in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Trinh Minh-ha, and others) seems to carry out in the name of individualist resistance is the valorization of reified immediacies—the symptomatic effects of colonization in various forms of “orientalisms” and strategies of adaptations and cooptations—unconnected with the institutions and instrumentalities that subtend them. (“The Limits of Postcolonial Criticism: The Discourse of Edward Said”)

Although San Juan identifies translation as one of post-colonial studies’ objects of fetishization, this outcome could be avoided. For instance, when evaluating the translated languages or texts, it is not necessary to privilege them because they “exceed[s] prior subjectivities or languages” which suggests, for Cutter, the dominant and oppressive language of the hegemonic culture, English. Instead it may be argued that translated texts or a “new” language coexists with prior languages in a broader language system, and that a power relation remains between them. Thus, translational texts are not a syncretic or whole entity that could exert their hierarchical power over the others. What matters is how that revised power relationship functions in narrative and how such translational narrative reforms

subjects.

Cultural translation is not just lexical translation; it exemplifies the subject's way of thinking and underlies the narrative of the subjects who are in between cultures. It requires negotiatory thinking, which can be found in the heroines' narratives in *The Woman Warrior*, *The Joy Luck Club*, or *Bone*. It might be inconsistent and haphazard because it is a survival tactic for a bi- or more cultural subject to live in American society. Whether to translate or not or whether one is able to translate or not depends on the context. Furthermore, because of its nature, cultural translation does not promise that the subjects will attain the results desired or expected by themselves or by critics. Some might say they fail in cultural translation or that they self-exoticize themselves, but those "failures" and "self-exoticizations" are also their own voices, which should not be rejected and denied as inaccurate examples of Chinese Americans' voices. Seamless translation is a fantasy that tries to integrate Chinese Americans as a model minority into national discourse that promises them American Dreams while ignoring their suffering. The failure or painful process of cultural translation exposes the chasm in the discourse and provides Chinese American subjects with political, historical, but still personal space, from which they can tell their stories. In this way, cultural translation is an important strategy for Chinese American narratives. It underlines and modifies their identities through their narratives. In my analysis, protagonists/narrators and the novels are often identified through narrative because a text reflects the narrator/protagonist's psyche

even though the writer herself has overcome issues in her text. This issue of a writer and her text leads to another issue in relation to translation.

Translator/Writer

Translation reveals another issue of authorship. If a translated text contains alterity within it, how can a story-teller say that this is her own text? Is translation opposite to authorship? Is a daughter as a narrator just an interpreter objectively reporting ethnic cultures to her American readers? Is such a text only a guidebook of an ethnic culture? The four novels more or less deal with Chinese American cultural facts such as unique table manners or different educational systems, but those "facts" are always narrated through the writers' personal voices, in relationship to the plots. In other words, those seeming "facts" are stories themselves and more than pieces of information. As for the mothers' stories told by the daughters, this can be understood as an issue of representation in the meaning that Gayatri Spivak has raised in her classical essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Although the mothers are represented by their daughters, they are not strictly subalterns.[4] It is possible to say that the daughter writers try to represent their mothers by incorporating their mothers' stories into their own texts and that their translation is symbolically a violent act of mutilating the maternal body to make it fit into the daughter's discourse.

In Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, however, the

mothers' stories sometimes overwhelm the daughters'; their vivid and dramatic stories are juxtaposed to the daughters' gloomy and often dead-end stories. It is also possible to claim that the mothers' dramatic, fascinating tales represent another way to idealize and exoticize China and its people, but from the perspective of the daughters, the lively depiction of the China stories is understandable because it makes clear how much the mothers and their stories play in the daughters' subject formation. The mothers' stories play a crucial role in the daughters' own storytelling because in their childhood, it is the mothers' stories that conceptualize their world. The heroine of *The Woman Warrior* says, "Before we can leave our parents, they stuff our heads like the suitcase which they jam-pack with homemade underwear" (87). Growing up, they feel the world made by their mothers lacks something or that it is repressive once they experience the world outside the maternal world of Chinatown, but still the maternal world as memory haunts them and they cannot completely cut it off. The daughter as a protagonist/narrator tries to convey to readers this immensity of the mothers' Chinese stories, which is increased by the fact that they have never been to China. Moreover, their narratives do not represent any obvious grudge or hate against their mothers, which could ultimately make them commit matricide in their texts, by replacing the mothers. Kingston's collaborative story with her mother in the end of *The Woman Warrior* and Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, consisting of mothers and daughters' monologues, seem to prove this point.

Even though the daughter narrators avoid metaphorical matricide, the cultural gap between them is not resolved. This cultural gap also arises problematically in the representation of the authors themselves. As the fictional daughters help their mothers by translating Chinese into English and vice versa, the Chinese American writers are often expected to play the role of the cultural translators of Chinese culture for Americans who are unfamiliar with it. However, as their protagonists achieve their own narrative voice through translating their mothers' stories, the writers affirm their artistic creativity by using imagination when translating Chinese cultural contexts in their literary works. Their translations transform into literary art. Kingston, for example, says that she did not want to visit China before she finished her work because she was afraid that real China would be totally different from hers (Huntley, *Kingston* 11, Rabinowitz 177). Indeed, it is possible to say that she did not visit China because of her Orientalism and that she tried to preserve exotic images of China in order to appeal to the mainstream.

If we consider the Chinese American woman author's profession, it is not egoistic of her to avoid seeing real China to write about China. She could exercise her own imagination and creativity, which are nurtured by her experience as an American girl in Chinatown, in order to depict her own China in a Chinese American context. As long as they are fiction writers, it is a violation of their artistic freedom to ask them to write about any actual places as they exist/-ed in a scientific, academic way. Kingston chose to write fiction as her

profession, not to write a report, study books or guidebooks of Chinatown; therefore, any evaluation of her as a writer should be based on her own artistic creativity, not on its factuality. This issue applies not solely to Kingston but to all other writers who deal with their parents' stories or any cultural and historical facts. They write novels, not memoirs (even though the word, memoirs, appears in the subtitle of *The Woman Warrior* as a marketing strategy). After all, this is a question of authorship: to whom does the story belong? I would say it belongs to the writers, not their mothers, because they are the ones who write with their artistic interpretation and are brave enough to break the silence, risking being criticized and reproached by not only fellow Chinese Americans, but all the readers. Kingston says that her literary China is "the mythic China" that is a re-creation of "the China of reconstructed memory" (Huntley, *Kingston* 11). As a writer, she depicts China based on her own (communal) memory. The critics, such as Frank Chin and Katheryn M. Fong, who rebuke both Kingston's and Tan's depictions of China demand that they not only write academic reports of China, but also give up their own personal voices to retain traditional images of China as well as the myth of model minority. This is another way to "museumize" Chinese Americans, as if they were specimens in a glass box without their own voices, because such criticism is based on the idea that there is only one or the most authentic and appropriate representation of China, which the community and American society prefer. Hence, it is unavoidable that each writer portrays a different image of China generated from her own

perspective.

The plurality of the writers' own depictions of ethnic experiences corresponds to the capacity of translation to ascribe multiple meanings to one word. Authorship and translation are not conflicting concepts, but they overlap. As Harold Bloom has argued (5), there is no genuine authorship. Hence, this discussion assumes that both translated texts and subjects are affected by the original or a fantasy of the original. If the influence of the original functions in a negative way, it is probably appropriate to say they are "haunted." But even if they successfully deal with the original, they would not disappear, for Kingston's exorcism of "ghosts" by writing ultimately failed, as she says (Rabinowitz 178). Thus, what writers do in translating cultures is not to explain and "solve" their cultures so that the mainstream readers can easily consume them. They translate their experiences in order to define them not in their historically unusual community's context, but in the broader American context in which the protagonists must survive. This does not finalize the definition of their experience but provides just one interpretation that can be performed only by the writers. Their writing identity arises not in some sphere of cultural ambassadorial activities but in a new terrain, where Chinese Americans can speak about themselves with their voices, ultimately to be understood by others, not as a narrow, static formula, but as unstable identities just like those of other Americans.

Literary/Textual Survival

The enthusiasm of ethnic American writers who long to be recognized as American writers makes clear another issue of Chinese American women writers. Because many of them in the second generation often come from Chinatown or some other traditional Chinese family, their personal stories – hence their autobiographical novels – tend to take on a similar mood and share strong resemblances in settings and plots. This looks something like a plot of a Chinese American girl who grows up in and leaves Chinatown, her troubled family usually centered on a maternal figure, whose stories tell of an old, exotic China, and on the symbiotic, mystical bond between mothers and daughters. However, the writers should not be blamed for this tendency because if similar novels (at least in terms of plot) are found on the market, that is because of readers' demand for and the press's intention to sell such novels. What kind of desire lurks in this supply and demand if the readers mainly consist of white readers for an American publishing industry? This argument is futile so long as actual statistics of readers of ethnic American novels are not considered (Wendy Ho notes that there are a significant number of Asian American readers (44)). However, we should keep in mind that traditional industries including the press are usually dominated by existent powers that try to keep themselves in seats of authority. An episode of Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*'s problematic categorization as autobiography, which was a marketing strategy, also anticipates this point.

It is also important to consider Asian American novels as a body of texts in the

republic of American letters. It is certain that Asian American novels have loosely established themselves as a sect in American literature in the long battle against the Canon. Then again, if Asian American writers sell themselves as ethnic American writers, what kind of treatment do they really want from American readers and critics? This is as silly a question as to ask an Asian American woman writer to choose to be either an American feminist or a Chinese nationalist. The question has been presented by King-Kok Cheung, who asks, "Must a Chinese American Critic Choose between Feminism and Heroism?" in the subtitle of her article ("*The Woman Warrior* versus the Chinaman Pacific"). These questions arise where feminism and nationalism, or individual desires and community policies, clash. All four writers say in each context that they ultimately want to be recognized as writers rather than to be a representative of their ethnic community (Kingston, "Cultural Mis-readings"; Tan, "Required Readings"; F. Ng, Interview; M. Ng, Interview). In this light, the dissertation will treat the recurring plots of Chinese American women writers' texts, especially the protagonists' departure from Chinatown and their mothers, as the writers' anxiety to break and escape the framework of race, ethnicity or any cultural tradition in order to survive and be recognized as American writers. The following section will consider the significant roles that Chinatown and the mothers play in their writing and why they have to leave them, not only physically but also spiritually.

Politics of Chinatown

It is very interesting that the heroines of the four novels in question leave Chinatown or their families. Kingston's and Tan's novels do not emphasize or center on the protagonists' departure from Chinatown, but both Fae Myenne Ng's and Mei Ng's novels end as the heroines leave their parents' places. It can be said that Chinatown or any Chinese community stands at the center of the mother-daughter representations and plays a significant role in representations of the Chinese American women figures. In Wayne Wang's mother-daughter themed film, *Dim Sum*, for instance, an old man asks, "You can take the girl out of Chinatown, but can you take Chinatown out of the girl?" (Lowe 65). Chinatown emerges as more of a spiritual debt than a physical obstacle to Chinese American women subjects. This is not only because they grow up there, but also because it bears negative cultural meanings. Although Chinatown is a material reality for people who actually live there, it is often more of a culturally imagined space in other Americans' minds than an actual one because, obviously, not every Chinese American originates from Chinatown. David Leiwei Li, a literary critic, criticizes American readers and publishers who require Asianness in Asian American writers' texts. He writes:

> That Asia is a socially created space in American orientalist discourse and the discourse of Anglo-Saxon nationalism has a special impact on Asian American writers. First, Asia has historically occupied the position of the Other in

> Western imagination, whether civilizational or colonial, that has to be subdued or converted. Second, Asia is the superimposed homeland of Asian Americans whose allegiance to the United States, whether political or cultural, is perpetually in doubt … Third, by the spatial logic of the previous two points, Asia is the proper site of Asian American imagination …. [I]t is supposed to epitomize and embody *the* natural experience and essence of Asian Americans. (186; emphasis original)

"Asia" may be replaced by "Chinatown" in Li's argument above because Chinatown is often perceived as a miniaturized version of old China. Furthermore, some Chinese immigrants have tried to preserve Chinese culture by performing traditional Chinese rituals there, as in *The Woman Warrior*.[5] As revealed in Ng's *Bone*, Chinatown is not a homogenous place exclusively for Chinese Americans, but for other racial minorities such as Peruvians. However, through Chinatown, the ghettoized identity of Chinese Americans "as perpetual house guests at best and invading vermin at worst" (Wong, *Reading* 43) is confirmed and reinforced.

One source of the problematic representations of Chinatown in relation to mother-daughter relationships is the feminization and fetishization of Chinatown. The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act forced Chinese men to leave their wives in China, and their male subject position as husbands, a masculine position, became unstable in America. In addition,

their jobs in America, which were traditionally assigned to women, such as waiter or laundry worker, reduced their economic and labor force status to that of a feminine subject position. As a result, the association of femininity with Chinatown persists despite recurring mention of Chinatown in the novels as the site of patriarchy filled with misogyny. The effeminate image of Chinatown is twisted into the mainstream culture, where it is traditionally portrayed as an inscrutable, backward, or immoral space by comparison with the outside white society as the more substantial, advanced, moral, and liberated space. Following historian Nayan Shah, who analyzes Chinatown as a site of "queer domesticities" and "perverse spaces" (78, 79), literary critic Juliana Chang analyzes the background of Ng's *Bone* as "a racial ghetto inhabited primarily by male 'bachelors' and secondarily by a far smaller number of female 'prostitutes'" (113). She also argues that "The absence of nuclear family formation had the effect of inscribing Chinatown morality and sexuality as lewd and debauched" (113). The historically specific image of this Chinatown is, however, persistent in the mainstream culture. Chinatown in mainstream representations was marked by race and perceived as an abhorrent and abnormal space that decent white Americans should avoid unless they wanted voyeuristic adventures in that highly theatricalized exotic space. One of the famous lines in the Hollywood film, "Forget it, Jake, It's Chinatown" (*Chinatown*), reflects the mainstream perception of the place that Chinatown only functions as a stage for white characters involved in deceit, moral and political corruption, and ultimately murder, features that actually have

nothing to do with Chinatown and its actual inhabitants in the movie. Chinatown inhabitants are often just one of the props, or part of the exotic scenery that neither play significant roles nor even speak in such films.

Chinatown is fetishized not only in terms of location, but also in terms of its residents. In addition to the silent Chinatown residents who appear as little more than props in the movies, there are many popular China- and Chinatown-related mysterious, evil characters, such as Fu-Manchu, Charlie Chan, Dragon Lady or Song Liling in *M. Butterfly*. All of them represent old China or Chinatown as a mysterious, archaic space filled with superstitions, daily strange rituals, and, in many cases, with vice and evil. The tendency is still present in 2012's *Cloud Atlas*, in which an Asian place (Neo Seoul) and Asian people are staged only in future (thus not in reality) as "an uncaring abusive upper class of decadent consumers, slum dwellers (prostitutes, street musicians, etc.), or fabricants (human women genetically engineered to serve the 'consumers')" (Hamamoto). Although it has become a tourist space in contemporary commercial culture, Chinatown still possesses otherness because in race relations Chinese Americans remain a minority, and Chinese Americans or inhabitants of Chinatown financially depend on the tourists who are mainly "white middle-class men and women" with "the desire to see the exotic; the pull of an encounter with a different culture; the draw of slumming; and the attraction of experiencing, from a safe distance or with a police guide, racially charged urban dangers" (Berglund 5-6). Although Berglund's comment

refers to early 1900s Chinatown tourists, to some degree, it can be applied to the tourists of today.

Whereas Chinatown and its culture should be discussed in the broader context of America's national policy and its culture, mainstream curiosity and exoticism have consistently produced a stereotypical view of Asian Americans as a cultural other who is either a social vermin or victim. Being from Chinatown de-Americanizes Chinese Americans, denies Americanness in their identities, and reduces them to strange foreigners or sojourners who will leave America someday. Nonetheless, the subject of Chinese Americans in Chinatown is formed through American Chineseness, which could be Hollywood kung-fu or Chinese gang movies, or *The Woman Warrior*'s mother's use of Seagram's 7, an obviously Western product, in a traditional Chinese ritual (185). Their Chinese heritage is often exposed to Americanness and, thus being changed, is not a static reflection of old China.

Just as literary critic Elaine H. Kim devotes a whole chapter representing Chinatown in her *Asian American Literature* (91-121), Chinatown has played an important role in Chinese American novels and its analyses. Because of literary criticism's recent interest in space, Chinatown is also being reviewed and reconfigured. Whereas my own analysis of the four novels does not introduce a wholly new characterization of or understanding about Chinatown, the dissertation will depict Chinatown as a culturally and politically constructed, historical space. It will also trace how the heroines reconfigure or maintain their notions of

Chinatown as the plots develop. Moreover, although my treatment of Chinatown as a space is consistent in many respects with how it has been approached by other literary critics such as Juliana Chang, Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (*Reading*) and Elaine H. Kim, the present discussion highlights elements revealed specifically in the context of mother-daughter relationships, particularly in regard to the representation of maternal figures in Chinatown. The traditional atmosphere of Chinatown, as it is reflected in depictions of mothers' dialogue and behavior, affects their daughters' subject formation as their role models or negative examples. The following section considers mothers in Chinatown and their influence on their daughters in the volatile context of representations of fetishized women of color.

Politics of Chinatown Mothers

In Chinatown, which is disciplined and organized by American immigration policies and mainstream culture, mother-daughter relationships are reinforced by old China's patriarchal culture and become doubly problematic. Arguments about Asian American women writers' novels, especially in feminist readings, often celebrate representations of relationships between mysteriously powerful mothers and spiritually weak, American-born daughters who should be stimulated and revived by their mothers. Women bonding in the patriarchal society of old China and Chinatown is empowering for oppressed women in Chinatown, but overemphasis on this Chinese mother-daughter relationship without delving

into their cultural and social conditions runs the risk of idealizing Chinese American culture. Unfortunately, the discourse that considers minority culture to be liberating and transcendental animates not only mainstream culture, but also academic spheres in the form of fetishized ethnic cultures, as argued above. For example, Rey Chow, a major authority of post-colonial and feminist criticism, has criticized Julia Kristeva for feminizing China in order to criticize Western cultures in *About Chinese Women* (Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity* 5-9). Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Woman, Native, Other* is another example that prompts Western intellects to see culture and people of the third world as academically inspiring objects.[1] Given the popularity of Kristeva and Minh-ha, the idea of third world countries and even Asian American communities as inscrutable, revelatory spaces may be a persistent tendency, one that becomes especially problematic in the depiction of Chinese American mother-daughter relationships because of its oversimplification of actual power relations.

The association of Chinatown with femininity or the maternal may be also a risky symptom of ghettoization of Chinese American women inside Chinatown. The daughters in *The Joy Luck Club* often have problems in their relationships with others, or are worried about the lack of maternal love. They consider their matrilineal heritage shameful based on culturally constructed American images of China until their mothers reframe that heritage by sharing their stories. By storytelling, the mothers make their daughters see flaws in their own thoughts or imply their absolute love for them. The daughters' confidence as Chinese

American women is regained through the mothers' secret survival stories of old China, which validate the daughters' Asian subjectivity as proud daughters of the surviving mothers. The mothers' stories are embodied and practiced as lessons through the daughters' reality. That is, even though the mothers gain agency in the stories of their traumatic sufferings and miraculous recovery from their plight in old China, it is possible to say that their power or even their realities are confined to their Chinese stories. The mothers usually work and live inside Chinatown because of racial discrimination outside, and their mystical stories of old China are unraveled also in their homes in Chinatown. In *The Joy Luck Club* or *The Woman Warrior*, the historical complexities of Chinese women's confinement in Chinatown might be compensated and covered by the mothers' powerful stories, yet the mothers' power is limited to Chinatown.

In *The Woman Warrior*, for instance, Brave Orchid, the heroine's mother, is practically powerless outside Chinatown and fails to help her younger sister, Moon Orchid, regain her wifehood in America. In Los Angeles, she is considered by white women to be a helpless Chinese woman who lacks command of English (148). Joy Luck mothers and Brave Orchid are active only inside Chinatown and their stories. In addition, because the stories are about old China and are told in Chinatown, the women figures and Chinatown are firmly associated with each other. Not only is the mother-daughter relationship linked with China, but also China and Chinatown themselves are marked with femininity, or more precisely, the

maternal. The mothers' limited power and the association of the mothers with Chinatown imply a maternal Chinatown. A sentimental emphasis on the mothers' power and sisterhood inside Chinatown could result in overlooking the oppressive dynamics within Chinatown and the discrimination and oppression outside. The maternalization of Chinatown does not liberate Chinese American women but only exoticizes and fetishizes the maternal and hides and naturalizes the political factors that caused confinement of Chinese American women in Chinatown.

As a side effect of the association of Chinatown with the mysterious maternal, Chinatown regresses into a pre-discursive, de-historicized world. As a result, the mother figures are relegated to the marginalized world of unintelligible discourse. The mother figures are powerful, but only in a pre-discursive space, robbed of their reality and agency to negotiate with reality. As often seen in pseudo psychoanalytic studies of the motherhood myth, such as maternal instinct, the discourse of the maternal is often sacralized and untouchable, making it difficult even for mothers themselves to demystify it. The sacralization of the maternal can result in marginalizing the maternal because it is treated as the inexplicable. When a given subject, such as Chinese mothers or occupants of Chinatown, is treated as inexplicable, the incapacity for speech transfers to them, and hence it also appears as though they cannot explain themselves and therefore lack singular agency. What mystification veils is the political matter of Chinese women's representation. Even though the

mothers in *The Woman Warrior* or *The Joy Luck Club* are powerful storytellers and overwhelm their daughters, their power in return betrays how far they have fallen from their wealthy or respected status, required as they are to perform menial jobs in an ethnic or racial division of labor, mistreated as a result of a racial bias due to coming to America. Inscrutability is an excuse that hides their powerlessness.

Exodus from Chinatown

Because of culturally distorted images of Chinese mothers in Chinatown, it can be difficult for the daughter to see the mother's reality beyond a culturally idealized motherhood that has become deeply naturalized and socially institutionalized as a keystone of the society. As a result, the daughters cannot avoid struggling in their relationships with their mothers, especially when they try to gain autonomy from them. The struggle for autonomy, combined with their confounding efforts to establish a clear sense of identity, often results in their leaving Chinatown. The mother-daughter relationships are represented under multilayered discourses of racism and sexism, which could remain unchallenged if the daughters remained in the mothers' space. Their being together maintains the tensions and suppressive operations of the discourses and thereby keeps them antagonistic to each other.[7] If this antagonism persisted, they would be in jeopardy of reproducing the situation in *Snow White*. Departure from Chinatown and the mothers, therefore, may be read as the daughters' symbolic

resolution to demystify the situation and see their mothers and community in a broader American context while criticizing and historicizing them (which includes the very American context itself). Independence, even if temporary, may enable the daughters to deal with the situation spiritually and physically and to salvage their mother-daughter relationships from outside the history without mythologizing it. As seen in the words of the heroine of *The Woman Warrior* – "I had to leave home in order to see the world logically" (204) – it is an obligatory process, if one wants to live outside of Chinatown regulations, to leave Chinatown to reconsider and re-conceptualize their experience and identity. Being a woman writer who exposes her ethnic secrets also finds herself outside the traditional filial duty of Chinese women. Deeply linked with their childhood, Chinatown is a place they must leave in order to survive in the present since they cannot dwell in the past, which is actually the present as a reproduced past (J. Chang 127).

If the daughters leave Chinatown and their mothers, this does not mean they marginalize them or romanticize their experience through nostalgia, but rather that they see the mothers from the outside and free themselves from the reproduction of exploitation. Stopping short of contemplating whether their ethnicity as outsiders is appropriate or not (or even possible), it is helpful to consider ways in which the distance could help one see things clearly and calmly, if not enthusiastically. The heroine of *The Woman Warrior* says, after gaining "logic," "Now colors are gentler and fewer; smells are antiseptic" (205). A decrease

in the number of colors and mild colors imply myopia, being unable to see things clearly. The heroine gains this short sight in exchange for her ability (or heritage) to see absurd things such as “a spirit,” an illogical entity (205). She could stay in Chinatown and keep seeing ghosts, but she chooses otherwise. All the Chinese American women writers discussed in the following chapters do the same to survive outside Chinatown, not to live in the past and continue dreaming of ghosts and their mothers’ Chinese stories.

In this discussion, Chinese American women writers must deal with these layered problems on the two levels inside and outside the texts. The daughter heroines must leave Chinatown to gain autonomy spiritually and geographically while the authors themselves have to establish their writing identity beyond the comfortable and familiar theme of Chinatown in order to be appreciated and recognized as universal, or at least American. In this way, Asian American authors writing about the significance of family by using Asian American characters differentiate their narrative treatment of what might be generalized as a universal theme if the same narratives featured characters who are white Americans. As surviving authors in American letters, they translate their ethnic and gender survival into literary survival in American literature. Positions for ethnic minorities, especially Asians, are limited in most industries and fields for reasons beyond the fact that they are simply being excluded; nobody wants a second Kingston, and that is why Tan is often portrayed as a (literary) celebrity while Kingston is treated as a godmother of Asian American literature.

This representation of Chinese American women writers makes it more difficult for the subsequent writers to generate their own self-portraits through their works or any other activities. (Tan often appears on television programs, especially when promoting her new works, and her interaction with other literary celebrities is well known; Kingston is also known as an activist.) They have to decide what kind of self-representation looks more unprecedented. What will look more novel as a Chinese American woman? The plots, motifs, and tropes in their novels reflect their translational survival: how they, as daughters and writers, translate their memories and imaginations into literature in order to survive as writers in American letters.

The four heroines express their own thoughts and stories instead of repeating the model minority myth and their mothers' Chinese stories. This is important because acquiring a personal voice is essential in subject formation not only for oneself as a literary figure, but also as a writer of one's own narrative. In her argument about the function of autobiography in *The Woman Warrior,* Sidonie Smith claims, "In dialogic engagement with her mother's word, she [the heroine] struggles to constitute the voice of her own subjectivity, to emerge from a past dominated by stories told to her … into a present articulated by her own storytelling" (59). In other words, the daughter heroines must reinvent themselves through their Chinese heritage ("her mother's word") to be a speaking subject in "a present," not in a past which is fixed and forgotten, unless the heroines retell and revive them. "She [the

heroine of *The Woman Warrior*]" in Smith's argument could be replaced by the Chinese American women writers themselves. They are obliged to emerge from their racialized and gendered status as Chinese American women writers to be American writers. Race and gender are never neutralized or ignored, but as writers who could exercise imagination, their creativity should dislodge them from those categories; otherwise their text could be propaganda. In fact, they try to avoid being representatives of their community. The writers' storytelling creates a nexus of translation, imagination, invention and preservation. The heroine's departure from Chinatown is the writer's proclamation that she has become an American writer.

Considering Kingston and Tan's second novels, they actually did not discard their ethnic themes but became more vocal in writing about human beings, rather than exclusively about Chinese American women. Kingston dealt with the opposite gender in *China Men* (1980), and Tan explored the manipulation of memory and wrote more about the mother figures in America and dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship in *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991). They may seem to hold onto their ethnicity because of their Chinese American characters and settings, but their themes have broadened beyond feminist interests and could appeal to a universal audience of readers through the use of memory, wherein the heroines engage with their emerging subjectivity through their acts of recollection. Although their second novels have not reached the status of their first ones, they are still considered to

represent their careers. With or without a historical record of consistent sales, Kingston and Tan have become the faces of Chinese American writers. On the other hand, Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* and Mei Ng's *Eating Chinese Food Naked* obviously attempt to differentiate themselves from Kingston and Tan by including fewer descriptions of China and Chinese stories and more explicit depictions of sexuality.[8] Because the daughters in these narratives are characterized by less Chineseness, these heroines might look "American." However, their racial experiences are still represented through their feelings of alienation or filial sentiment toward their toiling parents. They lead double lives inside and outside their families or Chinatown, and their duality is also represented as a translational narrative. It is possible to say that translational narrative is also a symptom of their anxiety about assimilation because their negotiatory thinking suggests that they still oscillate between the two cultures.

The following chapters analyze how the heroines face this assimilation anxiety through close readings of the representations of mother-daughter relationships and cultural translation. Each novel introduces different experiences of being a Chinese American woman despite the similar plots and motifs. Chapter 2 will examine Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* in terms of the protagonist's exorcism of kuei, or Ghosts—a recurring, enigmatic motif in the text—and the ways in which the Ghosts play in the narrator's self-search as she grows up in and leaves Chinatown. A central question concerns whether she is really content in her present life as a colored subject in American society when she writes this "autobiography," a

self-representation delving into her traumatic past made of Chinease stories and Chinatown reality. Chapter 3 analyzes Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* in terms of the ways in which the daughters approach their ethnic heritage. Although the discussion raises the same question that the heroine of *The Woman Warrior* asks, one of the daughters in *The Joy Luck Club* gives a different answer. Chapter 4 considers Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*, which concludes in a more positive way than *The Woman Warrior* despite the collapsing family and sister's alleged suicide. For this reading, I will focus on the heroine's survival tactics to leave Chinatown. In the discussion of Mei Ng's *Eating Chinese Food Naked*, Chapter 5 focuses on sexuality, especially bisexuality and homosexuality, themes that are traditionally avoided in Asian American novels. The discussion will show that that the protagonist's incest fantasy with her mother and life in a traditional Chinese family (which used to run a laundry) are loosely linked to and interact with each other. My analysis will reveal why the ending, which depicts a typical departing daughter, is still haunted by the maternal motif. Chapter 6 organizes the analyses and explains how the mother-daughter relationship functions in each novel to show that each translational narrative gives a unique voice to each heroine. The dissertation will conclude that the mother-daughter relationships in the four novels are more than objects of feminist readings, for they reveal how the heroines' subject formation develops through their translational narratives, in which authorship is recognized and the novels become distinct parts of Chinese American women's experiences.

Chapter 2: The Anxiety of Assimilation in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoir of a Girlhood among Ghosts*

A Heroine's Anxiety

As the novel's subtitle indicates, the childhood of the heroine of *The Woman Warrior* is haunted by ghosts in Chinatown. The "ghosts" or Ghosts here refer to spirits and also to Americans seen through the eyes of Chinese immigrants. Furthermore, for the Chinese American heroine who has "had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhood fits in solid America" (*The Woman Warrior* 5), ghosts are also a symbol for Chineseness itself, which is difficult to translate into an English context. While western ghosts often refer to souls of the dead, non-physical entities, Kuei, the Chinese character for "ghosts," is often considered as an imaginary but physical creature. This minor lexical difference in the word is actually an important undercurrent of the text: cultural translation. How one interprets one word is not simply a lexical matter, but also a cultural one. In the end, however, even if the grown-up heroine indicates that she "continue[s] to sort out what's just my [her] childhood, just my [her] imagination, just my [her] family, just the village, just movies, just living" (205), she seems to give up categorizing these things when she says, "It translated well" (209) and lives in a "ghost-free" place outside Stockton's Chinatown (108). Given the last line, "It translated well," there should arise a question about whether she gives

up translation or she still has some hope for it; “well” could be interpreted in two ways, positive or slightly negative. What does this equivocal ending imply for the heroine’s cultural translation? This is not a narrow issue of motifs because this is a collection of stories in which the heroine tries to tell her memories of Chinatown childhood in the broader American context through cultural translation, and, given the ambiguous ending, she still has troubles with it. Through a focus on cultural translation, this chapter will analyze how translation in the novel is represented and how it constructs the heroine’s psyche of a Chinese American woman living outside her Chinatown community.

Although this patchwork text of Chinese legends and family history resists literary categorization, it is considered as a classic ethnic American bildungsroman that celebrates a Chinese American girl’s quest for an ethnic minority identity (King-kok Cheung 172). While it has been criticized for its inauthenticity and representation by cultural nationalists, it has been praised and celebrated in feminist readings for its brave heroine who accuses Chinatown of its crimes against women and for establishing a new female voice for Chinese Americans (Chin 29, Zhu 107). Because of its unique narrative style that combines a mixture of Chinese traditional stories with an American viewpoint of personal history, it has received attention from critics and students inside and outside the US, and there are numerous papers on this text. For all its extensive readership, there are nonetheless two predominant approaches to reading the text: one is to criticize its “inaccurate” representation of Asians or Chinese

Americans (Chin 29), and the other is to praise its hybrid quality (Shirley Geok-lin Lim's and Jess Row's articles exemplify the latter). These tendencies are also present in the readers' reception. Jess Row, an American professor teaching in the English department at the College of New Jersey, states, "When I query my first-year college students about books most of them have read, *The Woman Warrior* falls somewhere between *Beloved*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*" (1). It is a classic like *Romeo and Juliet* but does not belong to the Canon, in the same way as *Beloved*, and also contains an element of bildungsroman, or a coming-of-age story, like *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*. The mention of bildungsroman implies that the novel is considered to be a positive representation of an ethnic minority, but such an evaluation and the readings above suggest the ending a successful one in which the heroine has finally matured and overlook the pervasive ambiguity that betrays such positive readings.

It is worthwhile to touch on how equivocal the text is before looking into the heroine's evocation of the subtle and vague trope of translation. The novel depicts fragments of the life of the repressed but brave heroine, who never stops telling stories, despite the fact that her "throat hurt constantly, vocal cords taut to snapping" (200). The pain in her throat indicates that she has to stop talking, but she says that "talking and not talking made the difference between sanity and insanity. Insane people were the ones who couldn't explain themselves" (186). Thus, she keeps on telling stories in order to avoid being labeled "insane,"

or one who cannot claim her own identity, which would otherwise be always explained by others. As in the first chapter where she tells the forbidden story of her adulterous aunt, her accusation of sexist Chinatown culture and racist American society is a brave and rebellious act while at the same time being painful and traumatic because she speaks with constant throat pain and she is still haunted by the ghost of her aunt (200, 16). She sacrifices a painless life for her own voice; her positive representation of a "woman warrior" is based on the victimized, suffering body of a Chinese American woman. Although the novel is celebrated for providing an ethnic American voice, her suffering should not be overlooked or covered over by the celebration of multiculturalism or a feminist desire for mother-daughter reconciliation. Having a voice in English is crucial for her identity formation in the US, but it does not necessarily cure the pain caused in the problematic process of her subject formation. The reading of the heroine's positive representation obscures the novel's underlying ambivalence. It is not a straightforward narrative for it highlights an ambiguous, problematic, and disturbing side of a Chinese American girl's memory of growing up in and eventually leaving Chinatown.

The ambivalence of the heroine's storytelling is revealed in the non-linear narrative, the uncertain age of the primary narrator, and the changing narrators. The confusing order of time shows how her memory is buried deep within and requires special handling. Regarding the changing narrators, the main narrator, the heroine, shifts to an omnipotent narrator in the

fourth chapter, where the heroine's mother's little sister from China, Moon Orchid, fails to adapt to America, or to translate her identity into the American context and is eventually taken to a mental hospital. Moon Orchid's inability to speak in English reflects the heroine's speechless kindergarten days and the desperate attempt to keep talking. Deployment of the omnipotent narrator manifests her sense of awkwardness, as if to avoid telling this tragedy directly from her point of view so that she does not have to identify with the failing Chinese woman. Such literary techniques not only distance the heroine from the subject matter, but they also illuminate how they are significant in forging her Chinese American psyche. The obvious ambivalence can be seen in how the heroine's mother, Brave Orchid, discloses a forbidden story of No Name aunt, and how the heroine also breaks the taboo by retelling it in the novel. Another ambivalence, which is often unmentioned, is that the heroine is also a No Name Woman since her name is never mentioned in the novel. It should also be noted that many forms of translation, linguistic and also cultural translation in the novel, and the novel itself that tries to translate her Chinatown childhood to her American adulthood, are also ambivalent qualities.

These multiple sites of ambivalence make it difficult to claim that this schizophrenic text is really a bildungsroman that assures both the heroine's integrated Chinese American identity and a linear process of maturity that can resolve her chaotic childhood composed of Chinese stories and American reality. When the heroine concludes by saying, "it translated

well," it implies that she fails to resolve her mixed, conflicting emotions of frustration and satisfaction about the result of the translation as a symbol for resolution of her confusing childhood. The comment also suggests that there is something amiss: her sense of guilt and regret that she fails to translate a Chinese story into an American context perfectly. So how do we interpret this heroine's state, or the phrase "It translated well"? The subtitle of the novel is "Memoirs of a Girlhood," which leads to the question of what the status of her adulthood is, in the period of life in which she decides to write her memoirs. Why should she dig so deep into painful memories that cause her to conclude with such an unsatisfactory remark? I am not denying those positive and negative readings of the novel, but the critical celebration of the novel obscures the heroine's painful process of translation of and negotiation with her life. The novel ends equivocally and leaves us with a haunting question: is she satisfied with her American life?

Translation and Ghosts

Regarding translation in *The Woman Warrior*, Chutima Pragatwutisarn says, "*The Woman Warrior* … is about the construction of Chinese-American identity as a process of translation," and "'translation' underscores the importance of linguistic practice in constituting cultural identity" (24). Pragatwutisarn argues that translation is a method for the heroine to overcome her "ghostly existence" and to "'unghost' herself by transforming

absence and invisibility into meaning and identity" (25). Grounded in Homi Bhabha's theory, she recognizes two sides of translation, wherein "[d]isjunction and association are two integral elements of translation." However, her conclusion is rather a positive one: "translation … both preserves and creates something new" (41). The conflict of two sides of translation is somehow outdone by "something new." This optimistic view of translation is also seen in Ken-fang Lee's analysis of the text. Lee says that "[c]ompared to the 'original' text, the translated text was normally considered inferior and secondary" (104-5), and positively concludes that "ghosts are exorcised by writing and translating the past to construct their [the heroines of Kingston and Amy Tan's novels] future" (105-6). Lee considers Ghosts an ambivalent cultural construct and argues that such ambivalence is a "third space," a Homi Bhabha term (Bhabha 37), which "opens up new possibilities to eschew oppositional thinking and offers a different strategy to defend against the appropriation and interpellation of dominant cultural hegemony" (Lee 106).

Bhabha's theory of cultural translation is, as seen above, often considered a positive interpretation of translation as a strategy for racialized, minority groups and individuals to object to and disrupt an ostensibly seamless national discourse. Bhabha himself, however, provides a more nuanced observation about translation. Regarding a "Third Space" in which the translation takes place, he states, "The production of meaning requires that these two places [the I and the You] be mobilized into passage through a Third Space" (53). This is a

place that converts meanings that pass from the I to the You, where misunderstanding and mis-recognition may occur: a scene of mistranslation. This impossibility of communication is ambivalent due to the fact that what you mean might not be what the listener understands. According to Bhabha, however, “politics can only become representative, a truly public discourse, through a splitting in the signification of the subject of representation; through an ambivalence at the point of the enunciation of a politics” (36). In his “The Commitment to the Theory,” “a space of translation” is “a place of hybridity” and, like “hybridity” or “mimicry,” translation is often regarded as a positive strategy for colonized or racialized individuals or groups that seek for political voices; but he also shows an unsettled and threatening side of translation by referring to miscommunication and mistranslation.

Miscommunication and mistranslation make clear the schisms in seemingly seamless translation, which serves the national discourse of racialized minority groups. Mistranslation in *The Woman Warrior*, which is often criticized, indeed unveils a problematic, potentially subversive aspect of cultural translation, which suggests that even miscommunication has positive meanings here. Bhabha paraphrases translation as “negotiation” (38, 56), “transformation” (47) and “transference of meaning” (39). These words carry a positive meaning since acts of negotiation or transformation disrupt fluent cultural translation and provide the oppressed a chance to respond to hegemonic discourse. But when he rephrases translation as “displacement” (39), he clearly recognizes a negative and uncanny aspect of

translation. “[T]ranslation and displacement” are juxtaposed with “translation or transference of meaning” (39); displacement indicates a disguised or distorted original space while transference focuses on a movement toward the other place. Translation as displacement implies a physical or cultural, and thus spiritual, uprooting: a painful act of the subject. Translation could be a strategy for intervention into hegemonic discourse, but it is also burdened with a sense of displacement.

Developing this idea, Stella Bolaki analyzes both positive and negative sides of translation in *The Woman Warrior* using Benjamin, Derrida and Barbara Johnson. She says that translation is a place of “promises and perils” (55). Through translation, the heroine has the possibility of gaining her own voice and at the same time experiences a loss of the original meaning and a sense of betrayal to the original. Despite the uncertainty shaping the rest of the novel, Bolaki nonetheless concludes that “*The Woman Warrior* may close with the unequivocal assertion ‘It translated well’” (55). On the contrary, however, this ending is indeed ambiguous and even not assertive. “Promise” and “peril” both imply possibility per se, words of the future perfect, but since translation has an original which is often untraceable, we also should look at what has occurred during translation.

These translation theories are problematic in some ways. They tend to emphasize translation as a refined aesthetic trope and obscure its necessity. As Martha J. Cutter comments, “translation sometimes fails” (253), and Derrida, “The miracle of translation does

not take place every day" (72), sublimation of translation to minorities' cultural resistance is an accidental production. Cutter argues that preserving untranslated words in English texts makes translational processes visible. Such texts provide a "language in between dominant and marginalized discourses," a "newly forged language" that "challenges both indigenous, conventional models of literature and the dominant models of the colonizer" (24). By mystifying translation as a miraculous power to subvert the structure of minority and majority discourses, they overlook that once translation's in-betweenness becomes another category and it loses its subversive potential because it turns into part of the structure. Indeed, such resistant translation can problematize the very conceit of the "original" and its authentic position, but privileging translation as a subversive force in the linguistic structure could result in sacrificing its potential to make visible the political process of translation. By providing two sides of translation, such as "promises and perils" or Cutter's "lost and found," translation emerges as a goal-oriented process that categorizes what is good translation and what is not. Especially when Cutter observes, "This balancing [between native and foreign tongues] can occur only when the translator has thought carefully and creatively about his or her obligation to both the words and the worlds of source text, as well as the words and worlds of the target text" (18), she implies how translation should be performed and the goal for which it should aim. The two aspects of translation, which are originally provided for its diversity, result in constricting it. In Cutter's treatment of Barbara Johnson, who says a

translator must be estimated as a “faithful bigamist” (143), translation is an oxymoronic performance, which does not allow a telos even though the translator must translate out of sheer necessity. If translators feel they fail every time they translate and “the miracle of translation” does not occur, that would be a frustrating and painful process. For such translators, translation is their way of life, which means their world is full of failures. They live in a limbo of translation, in cultural custody.

To clarify this point, it will be helpful to borrow a term from Anne Anlin Cheng, who proposes the term “racial melancholia,” based on Freud’s concept, and introduces a more drastic reading of the text. Her analysis of the depressive effect of cultural translation shares Bhabha’s idea of translation as displacement. She states, “I read hypochondria as a parable for the narrator’s psychical activities in the face of assimilation, activities that help to organize the self’s response to intrasubjective threats in a racist and sexist world” (68). She also takes issue with the phrase, “It translated well,” pointing out

> Most readers have taken the statement “it translated well” to be unironic – indeed, redemptive. Yet what does the narrator mean that the song “translated well” in a text so burdened with the price of cultural translations? … [I]t seems pertinent to ask why the narrator needs this moment of recuperation, so out of character with the tone of the narrative. It is as though the narrator’s suspicion of such a vision can only express itself as desire (again that

hypochondriacal logic) …. (90)

For Cheng, even the last episode of the collaborative story of the heroine and her mother, which is often considered an embodiment of a feminist desire for mother-daughter reconciliation, is anxiety-ridden. She argues, “As long as the narrator narrates in anxiety or in longing, she need not relinquish the mother, who is in fact already being left behind as the narrator replaces her voice with her own: a movement of love and a movement of loss” (90). “It translated well” is the statement of a daughter who longs for cultural legibility yet is held back by her painful memories and sense of failure.

Cheng’s argument leads to the possibility of communal grief and the cure of traumatic intrasubjective identity formation; however, I would like to focus on a function of the heroine’s cultural translation. I argue that one of the heroine’s “psychical activities” is translation, which includes any translational activities. Translation is, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “The action or process of turning from one language into another; also, the product of this; a version in a different language” (*OED Online*). The primary meaning is the act of translating itself, but it also refers to its result and implies that there is an original. Like many English words, it refers to action, process and product, and is an ambivalent word, since an action does not always promise an expected product. If the result is not perfect, the translator may suffer from a sense of betrayal. For the heroine, translation has not only linguistic, but also cultural meanings that constitute her Chinese American identity, which

always has to translate both Chinatown and American cultures. Unlike those who speak English as their first language, she is a translating and translated subject whose failure in cultural translation significantly affects her subject formation.

Ghost Narrative

When the heroine has to tell an American pharmacist that her family needs "reparation candy" to lift a curse of a mistaken delivery of drugs to her house (170), she "felt the weight and immensity of things impossible to explain to the druggist" (171). She shares the idea of the curse with her Chinese mother, but she also knows that Americans would not understand it. Translation is "impossible" and she even cannot speak in English when she asks, "Mymotherseztagimmesomecandy," to which the pharmacist answers, "What? Speak up. Speak English" (170). The heroine's struggle for the perfect translation fails, and the original meaning of "candy" is lost on the pharmacist. When she is asked why her family needs candy, she is unable to explain and can only demand the candy. In response to the mangled request, the pharmacist gives her a "handful of lollipops" anyway (171). Both a Chinese custom and even the heroine are marked with ineffability. This incident of the impossibility of cultural translation constitutes the heroine's negative view of Chinatown culture and her mother who embodies it and who also demands that the heroine practice it:

> He [the pharmacist] gave us candy all year round, year after year, every time

> we went into the drugstore. When different druggists or clerks waited on us, they also gave us candy. They had talked us over. They gave us Halloween candy in December, Christmas candy around Valentine's day, candy hearts at Easter, and Easter eggs at Halloween. "See?" said our mother. "They understand. You kids just aren't very brave." But I knew they did not understand. They thought we were beggars without a home who lived in back of the laundry. They felt sorry for us. I did not eat their candy. I did not go inside the drugstore or walk past it unless my parents forced me to. Whenever we had a prescription filled, the druggist put candy in the medicine bag. This is what Chinese druggists normally do, except they give raisins. My mother thought she taught the Druggist Ghosts a lesson in good manners (which is the same word as "traditions"). (171)

Cultural translation fails and the traumatic result prohibits her from eating the candy and even from being near the store. Still more problematic is her internalization of the pharmacists', white Americans', negative view of Chinese immigrants as beggars. Indeed, she is highly aware of how American Ghosts perceive other Chinese emigrants:

> They [the Chinese neighbors] turn the radio up full blast to hear the operas, which do not seem to hurt their ears. And they yell over the singers that wail over the drums, everybody talking at once, big arm gestures, spit flying. You

> can see the disgust on American faces looking at women like that. It isn't just the loudness. It is the way Chinese sounds, chingchong ugly, to American ears, not beautiful like Japanese sayonara words with the consonants and vowels as regular as Italian. We make guttural peasant noise and have Ton Duc Thans names you can't remember. (171-72)

The heroine then observes how American English is "too soft" and how she and other Chinese American girls "had to whisper to make ourselves American-feminine" (172). The softness of American culture is also found in another episode, in which she finds English "I" and "here" difficult to understand. In an English class, the heroine

> stared at that middle line [of "I"] and waited so long for its black center to resolve into tight strokes and dots that I forgot to pronounce it. The other troublesome word was 'here,' no strong consonant to hang on to, and so flat, when 'here' is two mountainous ideographs. The teacher, who had already told me every day how to read 'I' and 'here,' put me in the low corner under the stairs again, where the noisy boys usually sat. (167)

She fails to translate Chinese herself into the American "I," and also fails to transfer herself from Chinatown to an American school, from there to "here." Cutter also points out the heroine's comment that "There is a Chinese word for the female I – which is 'slave'" (47), and argues that she is not satisfied with either a Western or Chinese "'I'dentity" of herself

(Cutter 49). She literally cannot say “I am here” and has no place in American culture other than in “the low corner under the stairs” (167). Being unable to talk because of failed translation informs her Chinese American identity with both an inability to profess selfhood and a physical existence in the margins. In another episode at the American school, the heroine says, “I remember telling the Hawaiian teacher, ‘We Chinese can’t sing ‘land where our father dies.’’ She argued with me about politics, while I meant because of curses. But how can I have that memory when I couldn’t talk? My mother says that we, like the ghosts, have no memories” (167). This is also a moment of miscommunication and mistranslation in which the American teacher cannot read between the lines of the heroine’s explanation. What is politics to the American teacher is just a superstitious tradition for the Chinese American heroine. The heroine, however, has no idea what the “curses” are because she, like Americans, has no memories of China. When she says “how can I have that memory when I couldn’t talk,” she implies that a person cannot claim their existence through discourse if she or he does not have memories. “Memories” here are like the origins that explain individuals’ histories and thus their identity. The failure of cultural translation robs the heroine of her Chinese identity because she is not an authentic Chinese who has “memories.”

In a world where she is denied her origin, she has to assimilate another identity to claim her existence of “I am here.” She has already been rejected by Chinatown and her mother because she is a girl and resembles the American ghosts. Moreover, she has an

abhorrence of Chinese emigrants, whose language is “chingchong ugly, to American ears.” Assimilation, or cultural translation of ethnic abnormality to American normality, is based on abjection and negation of one’s own identity. As she says, however, American English is “too soft” and again suggests that she is not satisfied with American culture, either. She is, indeed, in the “‘in-between’ situation” (Lee 106). It is not a creative and subversive space but rather a distressing, frustrating space where one is doomed to fail to be either Chinese or American: a limbo for unrecognized, forgotten ghosts.

Sau-ling Cynthia Wong states, “A highly assimilated American-born Asian is troubled by a version of himself/herself that serves as a reminder of disowned Asian descent” (*Reading* 92), which she calls a “racial shadow,” a residue of cultural translation and assimilation. The heroine, who leaves misogynistic Chinatown only to be disillusioned by American society, could not be considered “highly assimilated” because she is in limbo between the two cultures. Moreover, although those who are not highly assimilated can be also haunted by racial shadows, in this case the shadow emphasizes how one does not belong to that race. Even though she knows the Chinese female I, she cannot identify herself with it. She resists being a traditional Chinese daughter who goes to “typing school” and lives the model minority myth (203). However, her efforts to distance herself from Chineseness ultimately fail. Wong argues that the quiet girl the heroine tortures in the school lavatory is a racial shadow and writes that she represents “a single hopeless case of unassimilability” in

her “recent and insecure convert to Americanization” (*Reading* 90). The heroine’s failure to control the quiet girl implies that Americanization is an impossible dream that she has to keep dreaming. If neither Chinatown nor American society has a place for her, how is her survival possible?

The grown-up heroine resides in “ghost-free” places outside the Chinatown community, so her survival might ultimately be associated with how she deals with Ghosts, or how she translates her Chineseness into the American context. Given the final, unsatisfying line, “It translated well,” she surely fails to exorcize them all, and her ghostly Chineseness is left untranslated, not materialized as text. In this light, the ending line reveals the heroine’s dilemma, the situation of a Chinese American woman trapped in impossible cultural translation. I do not intend to pathologize Asian Americans, but I would like to analyze how such pathological status is produced through cultural translation. The next question to pursue is how the dilemma produced through cultural translation affects the heroine’s psyche and what this impossibility of translation constructs within the heroine’s racialized body.

Ghosts in Translation

An analysis of conversations between the heroine and her mother will help to trace how the heroine’s failure to come to one logical conclusion results in the legible remnants of cultural translation. There are two reasons to focus on the heroine’s mother, Brave Orchid.

First, compared to the mother, her father is almost absent; and second, the strong presence of her mother prevails and represents Chinatown and its culture.[9] The first conversation takes place when the heroine tries to disclose her desire to leave her Chinatown community, and the other when the grown-up heroine returns to the parents' home.

In the misogynistic culture of Chinatown, the heroine often feels oppressed and hides her own desires so that she will not be labeled a "bad girl," which means that no one understands her. When she hears her parent or a neighbor saying, "Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds," she would "thrash on the floor and scream so hard I [she] couldn't talk" as a sign of her resistance. To this wordless outrage, the only response she gets is her parent saying, "I don't know. Bad, I guess" (46). Thus, her wishes, desires, fantasies and even trivial things such as killing a spider, pile up and turn into a long list of two hundred secrets from her mother. The list is a result of the heroine's avoidance of telling her Chinese American girl's experience to her Chinese mother: it is a list of her moments of failed cultural translation. The list runs from the easiest things to the most difficult things to confide in someone, and the episode begins like this: "Maybe because I was the one with the tongue cut loose, I had grown inside me a list of over two hundred things that I had to tell my mother so that she would know the true things about me and to stop the pain in my throat" (197). The tongue-cutting story is about a frenulectomy, surgery performed to make it easier to speak, which symbolizes an inferior Asian body that has to be surgically reformed to be cured and

also Chinese “barbarian” culture (J. Lim 50). However, she believes her mother cut her tongue to make her talk less, because she remembers the Chinese saying, “A ready tongue is an evil” (164). The heroine’s misunderstanding of the surgery’s purpose is also a failed cultural translation, which reveals mistranslation is a cultural, thus political construct that affects one’s subject formation. The true reason for her inability to speak in English is that she had no chance to learn English until after kindergarten (201), and it is possible to say that she calls up the Chinese saying to cover the painful memory of her speechless days. The heroine’s inability to speak in English does not originate from some ethnic characteristic of “barbarian” Chinese immigrants, then, but from their historical situation embodied as the confinement of the Chinese in Chinatown.

She tries to confess the secrets one by one to her mother in order to reconcile with her and ultimately with Chinatown’s mysterious misogynistic culture. The two hundred secrets list is a “Third Space,” for it arises between the heroine, “the I,” and her mother and Chinatown, “the You.” Even the idea of confession, however, is racialized as she describes some of the secrets, such as “the nuns who kept stopping us in the park, which was across the street from Chinese school, to tell us that if we didn’t get baptized we’d go to a hell like one of the nine Taoist hells forever” (197), or “the Mexican and Filipino girls at school who went to ‘confession,’ and how I envied them their white dresses and their chance Saturday to tell even thoughts that were sinful” (197-98). The nuns in the park opposite the Chinese school

symbolize American society, in which the Chinese are posed as secretive sinful subjects, and the telling of the secret is translated into Christian confession. The Mexican and Filipino girls' white dresses symbolize their innocence, which makes the heroine feel guilty of withholding "sinful" secrets from her mother and Chinatown. Her sense of betrayal, which is emblematized in her destiny to go to the "nine Taoist hells," is another device that makes her hate her Chinese identity. So as to overcome this sense of inferiority, she wishes, "If only I could let my mother know the list, she – and the world – would become more like me, and I would never be alone again" (198). She tells the secrets so that she will not be alone, vulnerable in American society; translation and assimilation are her self-defense in a racist world.

Her impossible desire for a union with her mother evokes a psychoanalytic frame of the pre-Oedipal stage, in which boundaries between the subject, child, and the object, mother, do not exist, hence, when there is no conflict or pain. This peaceful but regressive space has been often idealized in psychoanalytic feminist studies, but here in *The Woman Warrior*, it is clear that the emphasis on the maternal is a mystic and exotic cover for the racialized status of Chinese American subjects. If the maternal presence appears to prevail in the novel, it is because Chinese female immigrants are usually confined to Chinatown. The heroine's process of turning ethnic silence into a private sense of guilt is effected through the internalization of American/Christian culture that condemns Asian Americans to be inferior,

fallen from the “grace” of the mainstream. It is, however, clear that Chinese emigrants’ silence is rooted in their fear of deportation (183), rather than because of their “natural” character. Regarding this ethnic silence, she says, “[S]ometimes I hated the secrecy of the Chinese. ‘Don’t tell,’ said my parents, though we couldn’t tell if we wanted to because we didn’t know” (183). Her sense of guilt comes not only from having secrets, but also from not knowing what is so secret. The list also functions to compensate for her parents’ unknown secrets with her own secrets. It is her parents’ secrets that make her hate Chinese people including herself, but her own secrets turn her political hatred of the Chinese emigrants into personal hatred against herself; it is less painful for her to hate herself than hate her given race.

Eventually, she covers her racial self-hatred with a Christian confession and tells secrets to her mother. In a way, she tries to identify with those Mexican and Filipino girls, to be an innocent “American girl” (203). She “would pick a time of day when my [her] mother was alone and tell her one item a day…. My [Her] mother’s most peaceful time was in the evenings when she starched the white shirts … Yes, that would be the time and place for the telling” (198). She tries to tell one of the “really hard” secrets, the one about asking “the top magician” for “the *white* horse” (199, emphasis mine). But as she tells about the horse, it becomes clear that it is more about “the god … the one the Mexican and Filipino have, as in ‘God Bless America’” (200). She wants something higher to ordain her as a “white”

American. But her mother “acted as if she hadn’t heard” (199) and eventually says, “I can’t stand this whispering…. Senseless gabbings every night…. Whispering, whispering, making no sense. Madness. I don’t feel like hearing your craziness” (200). The heroine, who does not want to be the “crazy one” in her family, says, “So I had to stop, relieved in some ways. I shut my mouth, but I felt something alive tearing at my throat, bite by bite, from the inside. Soon there would be three hundred things, and too late to get them out before my mother grew old and died” (200). She is “[r]elieved” (199) when she confesses a secret, but here again she feels relieved to stop the fearful confession that elicits the possible punishment of being hit or having “hot starch” thrown at her (198). She still “felt something alive tearing at my throat,” which implies that nothing has been solved by the Christian confession, by identifying with other more American girls, and that she is still guilty. What is left unsaid inside and biting her throat is her attempt to identify with the Mexican and Filipino girls, her inmost desire for assimilation, to be an authentic American girl in the guise of translational confession.

Her confession fails because her ultimate goal is the impossible union with her mother, and also because she ignores her own self-hatred. She does not perceive the overwhelming relevance of her confession, and that is why her throat pain remains. One day, when she cannot bear the parents’ pressure to marry her to an ugly, stupid, but rich Chinese boy, she finally pours out the inmost secrets to her mother. This long rant, unlike the tentative confession, is about how she is actually so smart that she is capable of getting out of

Chinatown. Behind this rebellious plan is a desire for assimilation. She says, “I’m not going to Chinese school anymore. I’m going to run for office at American school, and I’m going to join clubs” (202). This ambition is based on her aversion to the Chinese school, where “the kids are rowdy and mean, fighting all night” (202). After she discloses “the hardest ten or twelve things on my list,” she says, “you tried to cut off my tongue, but it didn’t work” (202), but her mother answers back, “I cut it to make you talk more, not less, you dummy” (202). Tongue-tie surgery is for easier speaking, which is what her mother tells her, but knowing the Chinese saying, she becomes confused. This is a moment when the heroine’s mistranslation is disclosed and thus the cultural difference is exposed. The American-bred heroine does not understand the Chinese way of thinking. The conversation finally leads to a crucial moment for the heroine to realize the irreconcilable differences between her mother and herself.

When her mother complains that the heroine does not greet the neighbors, she answers that it is because they never greet her in the first place. But in her mother’s way of thinking, elderly people do not have to answer children. The Chinese idea of seniority is unfamiliar to the American heroine, and she thinks that they do not greet her because she is ugly and that her mother thinks the same. But surprisingly, the mother answers, “That’s what we’re supposed to say. That’s what Chinese say. We like to say the opposite.” Hearing her mother’s explanation, the heroine thinks, “It seemed to hurt her to tell me that – another guilt for my list to tell my mother, I thought. And suddenly I got very confused and lonely because

I was at that moment telling her my list, and in the telling, it grew. No higher listener. No listener but myself" (203-04). When her mother refers to a definition of Chinese, she unconsciously recognizes herself as someone not exactly Chinese since Chinese in China do not have to define themselves. This recognition of her liminal condition reveals difference within the category "Chinese." It would "hurt" her mother to realize that she is no longer an "authentic" Chinese but a Chinese immigrant in America because the rupture arising from that awareness concretizes an uprooting of identity, one that renews the pain of displacement, which the heroine understands and with which she sympathizes. Later in the novel, Brave Orchid agrees with her daughter's way of life, but this subtle understanding of one other could be read as a sign of their reconciliation.

Brave Orchid's statement has another effect on the heroine; she no longer has to seek for approval of the "higher listener." The one who always judges her turns out to have secrets, and thus to be guilty, too. But at the same time, she becomes "confused" because she realizes that her attempt to tell her secrets never ends. It is also possible to say that she is confused because everything her mother has said could mean the opposite. The heroine has learned to choose more plausible, logical choices thanks to American education, which she prefers to a Chinese one, because in the American school, they teach her how to raise her IQ. Logic is the opposite of Chinatown culture, which is full of her mother's stories, not facts ("And I don't want to listen to any more of your stories: they have no logic" (202)). Thinking logically, she

can let go of the opposite, absurd possibilities. But then she has to deal with the fact that everything her mother has said could have double meanings.

The opposite possibilities share a characteristic with the untranslated words, feelings, and ideas. They are left unsaid, thus unheard. It does not, however, mean she could not read them; they are embodied when she imagines the opposite possibilities. Translation is one way to reveal other possibilities. When the translator has trouble finding satisfying equivalents, seamless translation unravels and other lexical choices arise. When the heroine reveals that she is going to leave Chinatown, her mother calls her "Ho Chi Kuei." When the heroine explains that "Kuei" means a ghost, readers may notice that she has turned into one of the American Ghosts. Lee argues, "Kingston translates a cross-cultural experience into words and transforms the supposedly derogatory meaning of Ho Chi Kuei[10] into a more positive, hybrid identity" (116), but it is still doubtful if the word really has a "positive" effect on her efforts to seek assimilation. She insists on searching for the definition of the word, giving readers some possible equivalents, but eventually gives up. When she does not find a satisfactory equivalent of the word in a Chinese-English dictionary, she changes the subject slightly, saying, "I like to look up a troublesome, shameful thing and then say, 'Oh, is that all?' The simple explanation makes it less scary to go home after yelling at your mother and father. It drives the fear away and makes it possible someday to visit China, where I know now they don't sell girls or kill each other for no reason" (205). The meaning of Ho Chi Kuei remains

undefined, but she tries to “drive the fear away” so that she can visit China as a logical-thinking American woman. She feared China because of her mother’s Chinese stories of child trafficking and wars, and they also probably include “ghost stori[es]” she heard in her family laundry (87). She looks up Chinese words so that she can exorcize the ghosts that represent Chineseness.

This, however, is not a simple task for a Chinese American ghostbuster, because she herself is now one of the American Ghosts. Exorcism drives an external evil entity out of a person. But what if the thing you try to drive back is already internalized and inseparable? She needs a clear definition of Chineseness in order to be a logical American, but she preserves its ineffability so that she does not have to recognize her Chineseness—which makes it impossible for her to be an American without an ethnic prefix. This dilemma resulting from dealing with the residue of cultural translation is deeply linked to how she describes herself, that is, her identity. How can we describe the identity of a heroine who easily slips out beyond categorization? The untranslated is something that is there but not seen, like a ghost. By internalizing the untranslated, the heroine literally becomes like a ghost. She is Kuei for Chinese and a ghost for Americans and even herself because she cannot face her desire to assimilate. In a racist and sexist world, a Chinese American woman *is* a ghost with which even she herself would like to avoid identifying.

The heroine puts off her desire for assimilation and internalizes the ghostliness, which

eventually returns in an external, visible form. In the second conversation, the heroine again confronts her mother. The grown-up heroine returns home and tries to sleep when Brave Orchid enters the bedroom. The two women talk at cross purposes again. For example, when Brave Orchid says that she would be still young if in China, the heroine says that time is universal. At the end of the conversation, the heroine tells her that she has found more comfortable, “ghost-free” places outside Chinatown after her mother implies that she wants her daughter to live with her. The mother remarks, “It’s better, then, for you to stay away. The weather in California must not agree with you. You can come for visits…. Of course, you must go, Little Dog.” Brave Orchid approves the heroine’s choice and calls her by a childhood nickname before she leaves (108). Hearing the nickname, the heroine observes, “A weight lifted from me. The quilts must be filling with air. The world is somehow lighter. She has not called me that endearment for years” (108-09). The weight on her is of Chinese home-made quilts, which symbolize her mother’s expectations of her. Living outside Chinatown, she still feels guilty of betraying her mother’s hopes. It seems that she takes the childhood endearment as her mother’s approval of her choice. Nonetheless, it is unclear why she says, “Of course” as if she has to emphasize her approval, as if she says it to herself. The chapter does not end happily, but rather uncannily. The heroine remarks, “She [Brave Orchid] sends me on my way, working always and now old, dreaming the dreams about shrinking babies and the sky covered with airplanes and Chinatown bigger than the ones here” (109).

The airplane-filled sky during the war and the bigger Chinatown are in Brave Orchid's story, but shrinking babies are actually in the heroine's imagination (86-87). She makes her mother dream about horrific Chinese stories, so that she can leave her Chinatown community. Brave Orchid's saying "of course" confirms her decision to let her daughter live "normal" American life free from the scary Chinese stories that are indeed reality to Brave Orchid. It is possible to read a kind of mother-daughter reconciliation here, but it is a rather sad, nostalgic one in which she thrusts Chineseness upon her mother so that she can still dream of assimilation.

In the last chapter, where she tells the story of a Chinese poetess, she begins by saying, "I like to think" (207). This slight hesitation differs from a moment early in the narrative when she imagines an alternative story for her aunt in order to translate a Chinese story into American context, where she starts the story with "Perhaps" (6). There, it implies her awareness that her story is only one possibility based on a rejection of other possibilities. She tells about a song that the poetess brings back from an enemy country where she was captured as a hostage. She judges that the song was musically "translated well," implying that the translation was adequate though not perfect and that maybe something was lost in translation. Lee favorably argues, "The narrator translates cultures in order to constitute a hybrid identity, an identity signified by the term, Ho Chi Kuei" (116). But such an identity has been "ghostly" in American history, as Cheng puts it, and the hybridized identity is yet another name to stigmatize Asian Americans as cultural others in America. The heroine's

experience of loss in translation could not be compensated by “hybridization” or Lee’s uncertain “promise,” which could become an excuse for a better future that is always delayed by jargon. What is probably more important here is that she recognizes the loss in translation; she cannot translate perfectly and seamlessly, and she has to live in a patchwork world. And her statement does not mean that she is satisfied with it.

Indeed, she is dissatisfied with American life, which is evident as she depicts her racist boss or mocks American logical life;

> I had to leave home in order to see the world logically, logic the new way of seeing. I learned to think that mysteries are for explanation. I enjoy the simplicity. Concrete pours out of my mouth to cover the forests with freeways and sidewalks. Give me plastics, periodical tables, t.v. dinners with vegetables no more complex than peas mixed with carrots. Shine floodlights into dark corners: no ghosts. (204)

But neither can she return to her Chinatown community where she always gets sick. She says that outside Chinatown, “I don’t hear ghost sounds. I don’t stay awake listening to walking in the kitchen. I don’t hear the doors and windows unhinging” (108). Brave Orchid does not seem bothered by or does not hear those sounds that make the heroine uneasy; by contrast, it is as if the heroine suffers from auditory hallucinations. She also gets physically ill in the Chinatown community, in which original residents of Chinatown live after their homes have

vanished due to urban renewal. These ghostly sounds are the Chinatown culture itself, which still echoes and haunts her. Hiding from ghosts and having no place in the Chinatown community and mainstream American life, she can only live in “ghost-free” places. Given the heroine’s desire for and frustration with assimilation, “It translated well” does not exactly express confidence in cultural translation. She does not even place human beings as the subject in the sentence, implying that she distances herself from the agency of translation. “[W]ell” does not only express the heroine’s moderate satisfaction or a trifle of hope, but also her dissatisfaction, regret and despair. “It translated well” conveys a symptom of her racialized body, which still holds the residue of cultural translation within. Her untranslated Chineseness, a sign of her failed assimilation, still haunts her. Her narrative full of ghosts shows her pathological status of a Chinese American woman who suffers from untranslatable cultural differences.

Loss of the Mother and the Oblivion of Loss

After considering the mechanisms responsible for forming the anxiety found in the heroine’s translational narrative, it remains to explore what is Chineseness or Chinatown culture that makes the heroine suffer from auditory hallucination? What is so repressed that it appears as a symptom? Cheng, identifying the heroine’s problematic subject formation with the key term hypochondria, says of the heroine’s equivocal attitude toward assimilation;

> The hypochonriacal fantasy of “translating well,” as in the fantasy of a perfectly healthy body, staves off the nagging fear that a poor “translation” would mean the loss of the mother, for this story of the barbarian reed, too, is inherited from the mother. As long as the narrator in anxiety or in longing, she need not relinquish the mother, who is in fact already being left behind as the narrator replaces her voice with her own: a movement of love and a movement of loss. (90)

She further leads her argument to cultural origin as a fantasy, but I would like to delve into the mother-daughter relationship that Cheng mentions above because all the stories the heroine struggles to translate are stories of the daughter’s love and loss of her mother: the mother’s “original” story of the suicidal No Name aunt and the heroine’s reinterpretation of it with a twist, the mother’s Fa Mulan legend and the heroine’s frustration of being unable to be a woman warrior in America, and the mother’s ghostbuster story in China. The heroine’s fear of losing her mother, however, has not been discussed significantly. Pragatwutisarn, for example, recognizes similarities between T’sai Yen and Brave Orchid, but somehow decides to compare her with the heroine (40). Surely the heroine, who lives in the two worlds of Chinatown and American society and who aesthetically tells stories, resembles the poetess who keeps singing in her wandering life in her enemy land as a captive. It is also possible to say that she is more like Brave Orchid, who follows her husband to America only to descend

from a respected doctor to a laundress doing menial jobs and having children and still dreaming of the day of her return to China.

What is symptomatic in the heroine's omission to tell the story of her own mother's experience of discrimination in America? Aversion to history is intertwined with oblivion to it, so what is the relationship between the heroine's forgetting and her anxiety for assimilation? Lisa Lowe, arguing that citizenship is not a given, but a historically and racially ever-changing category, considers forgetting below:

> it ["political emancipation" through citizenship] requires the negation of history of social relationships that publicly racialized groups and successively constituted those groups as "nonwhite ineligible for citizenship." For Asian immigrants from Vietnam, Korea, or the Phillipnes, this negation involves "forgetting" the history of war in Asia and adapting the national historical narrative that disavows the existence of an American imperial project. (27)

Illusory citizenship acquired through "forgetting" is similar to the heroine's healthy body which is available only through repression of the traumatic experience of assimilation and the pursuit of assimilation as an impossible goal. A healthy and innocent body and American citizenship are both based on a dominant discourse of fantasy, an idea that further extends the salience of the heroine's confession, as discussed above.

What the heroine tries to forget by speaking of herself is probably her own mother,

who embodies the historical discrimination against Asian Americans; her lungs are damaged by the long-time labor in the family's laundry or she is getting rheumatism for "[s]cabbing in tomato fields" (103). The heroine does not talk much about her mother's loss: her mother hopes to come home, but finally the villagers in China take over her family's property (106) and the heroine's reply is, "We belong to the planet now, Mama" (107). This appeal to a universal rather than geographically situated home occurs because the heroine does not understand what it means to lose "motherland." China for the heroine is somewhere far away where absurd and illogical incidents happen. Indeed, she welcomes her mother's loss when she sees Brave Orchid buying new pieces of furniture, which she refuses to do when she still has a hope of coming home in China (190-91). This, however, does not mean that the heroine is free from her mother's loss and is able to enjoy her American life. The heroine is frustrated by not knowing what her parents' secret is, and as Cheng argues, the secrets, a sense of guilt, loss or silence are mis/translated and carried over generations, even though the younger generation does not know the causes for such feelings.

Since she learns much about China from her mother's stories, the heroine's internalized Chineseness includes her mother's incomprehensible loss, and this ghostly loss of her mother is the only certain bond between them. The heroine could maintain a relationship with her mother only by internalizing untranslated Chinesness. In light of intergenerational mis/translation of senses of secrecy, loss, silence or guilt, the

mother-daughter relationship is *not* an aesthetic motif of Asian American literature that ultimately sweetens and erases the historical and political situation of Asian Americans at a certain point of the history (Lowe 65). It is the nexus of a political situation and a personal history where the seemingly seamless translation or smooth assimilation is being unpacked, problematized, and politicized. The secrets, loss, silence and guilt, which are expressed in one phrase of the heroine's parents—"Don't tell" (183)—are not personal problems that can be resolved in a linear emplotment/development of a personal history, so-called bildungsroman (Lowe 114). They are the cultural sensitivity, a political construct formed through histories, and the adult heroine still struggles to "[s]peak up." She describes how

> [a] dumbness – a shame – still cracks my voice in two, even when I want to say "hello" casually, or ask an easy question in front of the check-out counter, or ask directions of a bus driver. I stand frozen, or I hold up the line with complete, grammatical sentence that comes squeaking out at impossible length. "What did you say?" says the cab driver, or "Speak up," so I have to perform again, only weaker the second time. A telephone call makes my throat bleed and takes up that day's courage. It spoils my day with self-disgust when I hear my broken voice comes skittering out into the open. It makes people wince to hear it. I'm getting better, though … I am making progress a little every day. (165)

While there are many instances of self-disgust, there is only one example of her “making progress.” “[G]etting better” is a hopeful phrase, which shows that the heroine is forgetting the cultural senses inherited from her mother. But it is not clear if she could totally cut herself off from the histories, especially her family history. In the bedroom conversation, she could have ignored her mother, pretending to sleep. She still cares about her mother, but their conversation comes at cross purposes. These misunderstandings and miscommunication are, however, the only connection between them. Many scholars argue that the heroine eventually reconciles with her mother, but I would add that reconciliation is possible not by mutual understanding, but only when they realize how different they are, how distant they are from each other, culturally and historically.

The internalization of loss or guilt is worked through re-telling her mother’s stories. Reproduction of Brave Orchid’s stories is based on the heroine’s love and respect for her; otherwise she would completely rewrite them or just ignore them. Because she cannot represent her mother, she can only interpret her mother’s stories in an American context. Her attempt, however, is fraught with danger of betraying her mother by making up different stories, mistranslation: an experience of loss of the original and the mother. Between this ambivalence of love and loss, indeed, the heroine could only say, “It translated well,” a phrase that can be read both positively and negatively. The ambivalence symbolizes the conflict in which the heroine is situated.

It should be noted that the heroine's narrative itself does not have a negative effect. It is undoubtable that her narrative rewrites and overwrites Asian American representations. But this does not mean that the effect of her narrative invalidates her traumatic ongoing experience of assimilation by restoring the lost origin of her Chineseness and aesthetically re-appropriating her trauma to the fantasy of American multiculturalism. Instead, it reveals that assimilation and translation are nonlinear, problematic processes and that such transition is not merely a single traumatic experience but an ongoing painful process that makes the heroine look pathetic and pathologized. Seen as Kuei by the Chinatown community and as a ghost, a prefixed American, by American society, the heroine can only keep telling stories, trapped in between love and loss, hope and frustration, which are only expressed through an equivocal phrase: "It translated well."

Chapter 3: The Resolution of Ethnicity in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*

Metaphoric Narrative

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) has elicited many arguments, both positive and negative, from Chinese or other ethnic Americans as well as white Americans, concerning her representation of Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans' identity. The monologue narratives of three Chinese mothers and four American daughters are triggered by the death of one mother, Suyuan, and they tell their stories two times in turn, just as in playing mah-jong games. Despite one critic's claims that the novel has nothing to do with racial or feminist concerns, as if Tan treated these lightly, it does in fact try to redefine what it means to be a Chinese American. "Becoming Chinese," which one daughter, Jing-mei, mentions as she enters China, is a provocative phrase that challenges the notion of there being an authentic Chinese (American) subject. In contrast to frequent readings that the novel follows and reinforces traditional Chinese American images, this chapter argues that the novel actually attempts to shift this kind of definitive representation and problematizes Chinese American experience as something that cannot be reduced to something singular or unified. Jing-mei's solution to the question may not satisfy all Asian Americans, but it is nonetheless a way to survive in America, where she once had to deny her ethnic heritage before coming to terms with it. Unlike the heroine of *The Woman Warrior*, who ends up in a melancholic state,

she finds an answer to her identity quest, even if it is somewhat idealized. In arguing against the academic tendency to belittle the novel, this discussion will consider the narrative style of the novel and examine the position of the novel in the field of feminist readings to explain some scholars' problematic readings of the novel and also to explore how Chinese American experience is represented as something else, a parable. Next, I will focus particularly on Jing-mei's story to analyze her quest for Chinese American identity in terms of her relationship with her mother as a Chinese cultural reference. By centering on this daughter's experience, although this means not treating at length the Joy Luck mothers' notion of identity (wherein Chineseness is created and reinforced in America), I will explore the ways in which "becoming Chinese" illuminates the elusiveness of ethnic categories.

It is safe to say that the novel's commercial success and popularity has evoked enormous academic and critical attention. The novel quickly became a bestseller and was later made into a Hollywood film by Wayne Wang in 1993, with an estimated budget of $11,000,000 and U.S. gross revenues of $32,861,136, figures that confirm its status as a hit ("The Joy Luck Club (1993) - IMDb"). The work received numerous comments from renowned writers, was reprinted an astonishing twenty-seven times, and sold 275,000 paper copies. Its paperback rights were sold for $1.2 million (Sau-ling Cynthia Wong 83). Numerous reviews and papers have been written about the text, and, as Wong notes, "Amy Tan had been chosen to perform the Asian American spokeswoman/figurehead function once

assigned to Maxine Hong Kingston" (S. Wong, "Sugar Sisterhood" 109). In a recent case, *The Joy Luck Club* surpassed *The Woman Warrior* for cultural significance when it was selected by the National Endowment for the Arts, a government-funded organization, to be included with other canonical American texts for the book-reading campaign, The Big Read. The novel has become a part of the textual body that represents the national image of a Chinese American. Tan is also famed as a celebrity writer for her association with other famous published writers, such as Stephen King, and for her frequent media exposure. As mentioned above, her representative role and ubiquity, whether she likes it or not, unavoidably bring a tension between the writer and her Asian American communities. Helena Grice observes, "Saccharine or not, Tan's sales figures are impressive, and her crossover appeal undeniable. Yet little attention has been paid to Tan's on-going interest in Chinese politics and history, and the revisionism which is increasingly present in her work" (36). The word "saccharine" recalls Sau-ling Cynthia Wong's article, "'Sugar Sisterhood': Situating the Amy Tan Phenomenon," which purports to analyze the backdrop of the novel's massive commercial success, but ends up criticizing its tendency to exoticize itself and cater to white readers' Orientalist views. It is somewhat strange that Wong, who writes about *The Woman Warrior* in "Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour?" and has no problem with Kingston's fabrication of Chinese legends,[11] so harshly criticizes Tan's "highly dubious or downright erroneous details" (90). Chae Youngsuk also criticizes the novel:

> The manner in which Tan delivers the stories of four Chinese women seems to be more intended to provide American readers with provocative, consumable, and entertaining cultural stories. In effect, Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* has contributed to commodifying Chinese culture while using her ethnic difference as a strategic marketing tool. To my thinking, *The Joy Luck Club*, Tan's first novel, is an extension of her business writing approach in that she draws attention strategically from readers, while theatricalizing Chinese cultures as "exotic spectacles." (45)

The title of Youngsuk's book, *Politicizing Asian American Literature*, suggests that Tan's commercial success interferes with Youngsuk's agenda of Asian American solidarity. Unlike Frank Chin's criticism that consistently attacks the Orientalism or fakeness of Kingston, David Henry Hwang, and Tan, these critical attacks from fellow Chinese and Asian Americans are a somewhat different phenomenon.

Deanna Fei, a Chinese American writer, says that even though when she was young "[m]y mother, my sisters, and I took turns devouring it [*The Joy Luck Club*]," "among a younger generation of Asian Americans, her name [Amy Tan] had become a dirty word" because

> by the time I was a high school senior, a teacher's mention of Amy Tan unleashed vitriol from every Asian American in the classroom. We were sick

> of having our personal essays, our anecdotes about our mothers, our every mention of Asian travels, customs, or dishes, summarily compared to *The Joy Luck Club*. There was something too easy, too knowing, about white Americans' embrace of the story. (Fei)

Tan's work has become a CliffsNotes for Asian American studies, a quite handy device with which white Americans can easily tell how Asian Americans should feel or react to their ethnic identity. As a result, Fei "can't recall the last time I [she] heard an Asian American mention her [Tan's] name without a grimace, a smirk, a rolling of the eyes." She remarks, however, that she had "had a long and complicated relationship with her" because even though she hates it as she matures, at the time of the publication it was still normal to "praise the novel's 'Oriental orientation'" and her "New York City public school still circulated a social studies textbook that described the Chinese as a yellow-skinned and slanty-eyed people" (Fei). Just as Kingston read Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945) (Huntley, *Kingston* 7) and Tan read *The Woman Warrior* ("A friend gave me *The Woman Warrior* and I devoured it in one sitting" (Talbot 8)), *The Joy Luck Club* was one of the few texts that showed "vibrant, complex portraits of present-day Chinese Americans" (Fei 2010).

So far, this "complicated" love-hate relationship has usually been excluded from critical reviews or analysis of the novel. This omission of its reception obscures a significant place the novel inhabits, one that could tell a lot about experience and survival of Chinese

immigrants and Chinese Americans in America. Survival here is not only physical, although this would fittingly refer to the Joy Luck mothers' hardship stories in China, which often include poverty, natural disaster and war. It also refers to their experience in America, where immigrants or ethnic Americans must learn the American way, namely, assimilate. In ethnic American studies, assimilation is often regarded as a negative phenomenon that, on a textual level, feeds American readers' "satisfaction of self-congratulation" which they derive from depiction of the Chinese mothers who "need[] the validation and protection of the West (in the form of immigration, a white husband …)" (S. Wong, "Sugar Sisterhood" 107, 108). However, assimilation means not only humiliation but also a chance to modify one's identity, especially after undergoing traumatic experiences, which the characters do not want to remember as they were. When Lindo Jong, one of the Joy Luck mothers who had escaped an abusive marriage life in China by cheating her husband's family, learns the English word "devious" from her daughter, Waverly, she begins to contemplate a change of her identity through American life, asking herself, "What did I lose? What did I get back in return? I will ask my daughter what she thinks" (*The Joy Luck Club* 266). She not only realizes and tries to understand her cultural change, but also tries to mend a fissure between herself and Waverly by talking about her change.

However, *this* reading of Chinese (American) identity is probably what irritates so many Chinese American critics: to turn the political matter of being a Chinese American into

a personal problem of mother-daughter relationships, or an issue of diaspora into a universal feminist matter. When Sau-ling Cynthia Wong describes the political matters surrounding Asian American literature, she uses two key terms, Necessity and Extravagance, which "signify two contrasting modes of existence and operation, one contained, survival-driven and conservation-minded, the other attracted to freedom, excess, emotional expressiveness, and autotelism" (Wong 13). For Wong, this complex tension is particularly active in Asian American writing. She states: "I raise them to make clear an issue Asian American writers face. These two terms are a driving force in many Asian American novels." Wong thus indicates that many early Asian American immigrants, as survivors in America, would not have the luxury of Extravagance. But as she argues later, the two terms are not the separate categories, but intermingled. Due to this capacity for them to blend she offers a warning: "[b]ecause Necessity and Extravagance operate at a high level of abstraction, there is always a danger that they will reduce historical experiences to schemata and parable; only a scrupulous grappling with textual complexities can counteract this bias" (*Reading* 13-14). Whether mother-daughterhood is marginalized and personalized or generalized and Westernized, Chinese American experiences seem to be cast aside in such reading. Nonetheless, I would argue that, for the Joy Luck mothers and their daughters, their Chinese identity or heritage is so deeply woven into their relationships that they cannot be divided into two separate issues. What is very political is also very personal to them. This becomes

clear in a story about Jing-mei's childhood blunder at a talent show, a performance whose inspiration arises from her mother's fantasy about American Dream stories as they are forced onto immigrants. When they try to identify themselves, they unavoidably capture their identity in a confusion of political matters and personal experiences. The result is not always what the critics want to see; it may seem too Orientalist, a fake or a mere "parable," which is a reduced and diluted version of Asian American realities.

Such dismissals do not take into account the extent to which being Orientalist or a fake, or making one's "historical experience" a "parable," is a way for them to survive. In those readings, even survival may be read as a compromise: "assimilation." If one speaks about a political matter from one's personal experience, it is also possible that one speaks of their experience *as* a political matter. These two methods have totally different effects though it depends on the specific text and contexts. If the political precedes the personal, texts tend to be propaganda. If one prioritizes a personal experience, the politics behind the experience could be obscured and may become a parable. Broadly speaking, *The Joy Luck Club* is the latter, and those American daughters speak of their Chinese American experience as a personal one, not as a politically categorized one. Thus, their Chinese American identity is always represented as something else; their identity is represented as a metaphor of Chinese American experience.

It is understandable that the critics and writers are upset that *The Joy Luck Club* has

become a parable and model of Asian American experience. Understanding one's identity in a frame of personal experience could be, however, another means of defining or coming to terms with one's identity. It may seem escapism because it is possible to say that writers/heroines replace political matters with personal ones, but it is also possible to say that Tan's narrative tries to reconcile the two seemingly conflicting aspects of a Chinese American woman's identity. Both Grice and Wong use the word "crossover" to explain the appealing characteristic of the novel: the novel has been translated into seventeen languages (Rozakis 3), which indicates that Tan's handling of the ethnic identity is recognized and appreciated by many. In order to understand the process by which the characters' experience moves from personal to metaphorical, in the following discussion, I will first examine the backdrop of the novel to situate the novel's popularity and introduce several problematic readings of the novel. Then I will analyze the process through two lenses: how Jing-mei sees her mother as a cultural other, and how she deals with her in a quest for Chinese American identity.

Jing-mei's narrative is of particular interest because it functions as an organizer of all the sixteen stories with two of her stories placed at the beginning and ending of the novel and the other two in the three mothers' sections. Jing-mei talks more than other characters and gives us much more information to analyze. Moreover, she is the only daughter who actually visits China, where she mentions this interesting idea of "becoming Chinese," a comment that raises questions about the authenticity of a Chinese American subject. Although the novel

structure and individual stories of each character may be productively discussed, the scope of this study does not include a study of its structure, nor an analysis of all the characters. Furthermore, my aim is not to generalize the other three daughters' narratives. On the contrary, the three daughters' stories actually show that there is no authentic narrative of Chinese Americans, which is my foundational stance and the position that this chapter will articulate.

Ambiguous Orientalism

Inspired by remarks in *Of Woman Born* (1976) by poet and writer Adrienne Rich, many feminist writers and scholars begin to tackle the previously unheeded issue of mother-daughter relationships. In an oft-quoted line, Rich observes, "This cathexis between mother and daughter – essential, distorted, misused – is the great unwritten story" (225). Inspired by Rich, in 1989, Marianne Hirsch publishes an exhaustive study of the relationship in Western literature, which concludes, "The greatest tragedy that occur between mother and daughter is when they cease being able to speak and to listen to one another. But what if they inhabit the same body, what if they are the same person, speaking with two voices?" (199). In the same year that Hirsch calls for theories and fictions with the two voices, *The Joy Luck Club*, which includes both mothers' and daughters' narratives, is published. The novel consists of sixteen monologues by the four pairs of mother and daughter (one mother, Suyuan,

is dead, so her part is narrated by her daughter, Jing-mei), who recount their childhood and adulthood in terms of their relationships with their mothers and daughters. Because of Kingston's critical acclaim, American readers were ready for another Asian American writer and, for some feminists such as Wendy Ho and Marina Heung who mention Hirsch in their analyses of *The Joy Luck Club*, the novel embodies Hirsch's call for feminist interest in mother-daughter relationships in general.

One of the factors that contributes to the acclaim of the novel is definitely the feminist readings of the mother-daughter relationship, in which mothers' and daughters' interactive narratives are frequently interpreted as emblems of sisterhood empowerment. Spiritually weak daughters are stimulated by their mothers' powerful survival stories in China, and the mothers are revived and freed from their guilty consciences by telling the truth. Although Helena Grice argues that the novel is not concerned with post-feminism at the time of its publication (unlike *The Woman Warrior*, which is an embodiment of second wave feminism), it is nonetheless meaningful for the coeval feminism in search of maternal narratives (Grice 44). Its huge attention from feminists, however, also leads to the frequent misunderstanding that Tan's works are unconcerned with racial matters (Grice 36). This interpretation seems to say "yes" to a version of an old question asked by King-Kok Cheung: "Must a Chinese American woman writer choose between feminism and heroism?" ("The Woman Warrior"). Yet it is clear that Tan takes the matter of race seriously, as I will show below. We also should

note that the political situation surrounding race and ethnicity has changed since *The Woman Warrior*. Tan's novel is criticized by cultural nationalists like Frank Chin, who rejects her as a fake. Chin places Tan on a trajectory with Kingston and David Henry Hwang as writers who present fabricated Chinese culture to cater to white readers. Chin comments, "Amy Tan opens her *Joy Luck Club* with a fake Chinese fairy tale…. The fairy tale is not Chinese but white racist. It is not informed by any Chinese intelligence. This is Confucian culture as seen through the interchangeable Chinese/Japanese/Korean/Vietnamese mix (depending on which is the yellow enemy of the moment) of Hollywood" (2). These judgments are, however, typically based on the notion that there are genuine, authentic "Chinese" as well as a genuine, unified Chinese culture, and support national, ethnic, and racial authenticity, on which racism and Orientalism are often based.

Because of its publication date, *The Joy Luck Club* is less explicit in its treatment of the racial ignorance about Asians in America as *The Woman Warrior* in 1975. This difference is perhaps another reason why both anti-and pro-Kingston critics of Asian Americans, such as Frank Chin or Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, are irritated. According to them, the novel misrepresents Chinese culture and instead generates a self-loathing, Orientalist view of China and Chinese. Wong criticizes the novel for its apparent shallowness: "Whereas the conflation of Chinese and Chinese American is explored in *The Woman Warrior* as a perilous legacy of Orientalism – the need to sort out the conflation defines the narrator/protagonist's lifelong act

of self-creation – it is never actively interrogated in *The Joy Luck Club*" (103). The American daughters' indifference to traditional Chinese culture does not mean they are not concerned with their Chinese American experiences. The novel interrogates the issues of racial ignorance and Orientalism, providing some moments of subtle, thus more obnoxious, racial ignorance and sexism against the heroines in America. For example, Rose, a daughter of An-mei Hsu, is mistaken as a Vietnamese and obliquely urged to break up with her white boyfriend by his mother (118). Fortunately, Ted, the boyfriend, resists this, and they eventually marry without objection from Ted's mother, but this incident of a helpless Chinese woman rescued by a white hero recurs. "'What should we do?' I asked, and I had a pained feeling I thought was the beginning of love…. With imagined tragedy hovering over us, we became inseparable, two halves creating the whole: ying and yang. I was victim to his hero. I was always in danger and he was always rescuing me. I would fall and he would lift me up. It was exhilarating and draining" (118-19). As she implies by the word "pained," the relationship with Ted is harmful to her although his intent to resist his own mother's racial discrimination is righteous. It is interesting that Rose quotes a concept of ancient Chinese philosophy, ying and yang, an image now popular in Western visual culture, to illustrate their relationship. This exoticism is a sign of a traditional racist story, in which a tormented colored woman is saved by a white man, and an ethnic woman is made to feel inferior and always feels the need to ask her white superior, "What should we do?" She uses the popular Asian

image to indicate this Western tendency. This allusion evokes not only the feminist concern with the Cinderella complex, but also a nexus of racial and gender matters. A Chinese American issue is mixed with a general women's problem here, which is symbolized in the exotic image of ying and yang.

Lena, a daughter of Ying-ying, also tells of this racial inferiority. "When I [Lena] fantasized about moving in with him [Harold, a white], I also dredged up my deepest fears: that he would tell me I smelled bad, that I had terrible bathroom habits, that my taste in music and television was appalling…. Rose … told me those kinds of thoughts are commonplace in women like us" (156). Rose's explanation of "us" is a mixed psyche of Chinese American women and baby boomers: specifically, the humiliation of Chinese women and the greed of baby boomers. Again, a Chinese American women's identity is part of something else, which is, in this case, a generational issue.

These racial issues in identity are not particular to the American daughters. Ying-ying, the mother of Lena, is harassed on the street in America by a drunken Chinese man, who shouts at her, "I found you! Suzie Wong, girl of my dreams! Hah!" (108). The Chinese man internalizes the image of a faithful Chinese prostitute created in British-American fantasy of China in *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960). Ying-ying is petrified and fails to save her daughter before the man is taken away by his friends. Although it is unclear how Ying-ying feels about this incident, it is later revealed that she was married to a man who treated her like

a prostitute and that she killed her baby as revenge. These moments are disturbing, but, according to Wong, they are just "Counter-Orientalist Gestures" ("Sugar Sisterhood" 98). She writes:

> [W]hether by design or not, she [Tan] manages to balance on a knife edge of ambiguity, producing texts in which Orientalist and counter-Orientalist interpretive possibilities jostle each other, sometimes within the same speech or scene…. The nonintellectual consumer of Orientalism can find much in *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife* to satisfy her curiosity about China and Chinatown; at the same time, subversions of naive voyeurism can be detected by the reader attuned to question of cultural production. ("Sugar Sisterhood" 99)

This double-faced quality of the novel is consistent with the very nature of *The Woman Warrior*, which often plays with words that only Chinese-speaking readers would understand while providing the very exotic kung-fu story of Fa Mulan that mainstream readers would enjoy. Wong's argument raises an important point, but because it is not in her trajectory she does not mention in which "speech or scene" the "ambiguity" appears. This omission is nonetheless telling because, as I argued in the previous chapter, ambiguity is often a chance to expose politically problematic moments.

Although Wong's remark is correct, such reading risks remaining superficial because

the argument is based on the basic plot, setting, and a linguistic aspect of the novel such as Romanized Chinese words, which are, according to her, unnecessary "Markers of Authenticity" that "announce[] 'We are Oriental' to the 'mainstream' reader" ("Sugar Sisterhood" 95, 96).[12] Unlike Kingston's complex and experimental narrative in *The Woman Warrior*, *The Joy Luck Club* consists of simple and almost systematically organized narratives. The novel's simplicity, which made *Publishers Weekly* say of the novel, "On the order of Maxine Hong Kingston's work, but more accessible" ("Fiction Book Review"), and consequent ease with which people approach and "understand" it, has resulted in its appearing too popular, too sentimental, too commercial, by comparison with Kingston, and thus unworthy of serious academic attention beyond feminist readings. For example, more than half of the papers anthologized in *Modern Critical Interpretation: Amy Tan's* The Joy Luck Club is more or less related to feminist readings. Only a few critics, such as Cynthia F. Wong, attempt to take academic approaches that stray beyond typical feminist readings of mother-daughter relationships (a recent paper by Tara Fickle challenges academic slights on the novel, is also an exceptional case). Are these critics, Sau-ling C. Wong or Grice, saying that *The Joy Luck Club* is unworthy of serious analysis because it is sentimental, secular, and accessible, but not experimental, creative, and lofty like *The Woman Warrior*? If there is an implicit code of what Asian American novels should be, it will never obtain the "extravagance" in general that Wong names in her book's title.[13] Such readings ultimately try

to limit what comprises the category of Asian American literature and hinder the possibility of its crossover quality and thereby prevent novels from being propaganda. Instead, we should then look at what else *The Joy Luck Club* "interrogates."

What matters is, therefore, not the novel's Orientalistic representation that caters to white readers, but how the heroines' traumatic racial moments resolve into hopeful endings for each narrator. Some critics such as Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, think this resolution amounts to an avoidance of present problems. I would argue, however, that only through these peaceful solutions can the traumatic moments be represented, especially when, after the Civil Rights movements, many Asian Americans, like Waverly or June in the novel, work in professional occupations, such as accountant or copywriter, and are no longer in the manual labors of their parents' generation, and they have gained some degree of equality (Zhao xxv). Helena Grice writes that *The Joy Luck Club* has nothing to do with the theoretical movement of that time, as if the novel did not contribute to academic study and did not reflect society (44). I contend, by contrast, that the novel acknowledges those issues of race and ethnicity through "saccharine" (Grice 36) stereotypical representation that can reach mainstream readers, not unlike the "bitter poison" put in "the sticky sweet dumpling" that An-mei's mother eats to commit suicide, an act that eventually empowers An-mei, who was a daughter of a fourth wife, the weakest position in an old Chinese family (*JLC* 239-40).

Against these readings, some critics have analyzed the novel, avoiding belittling it by

incorporating viewpoints beyond those of typical feminist perspectives, and Cynthia F. Wong is one of them. She discards a traditional prejudice toward Tan shown by critics who argue that she is trying to present authentic Chinese characters, and states, “her [Tan’s] characters are less concerned with finding a true self lost somewhere in China by way of earning the native informant moniker, than they are with constructing and inhabiting the fictions that they have devised for their survival in America” (C. Wong 60). This is one reason why the American daughters are not so keen to (re)connect with traditional Chinese culture like the heroine of *The Woman Warrior*. The narrative with scattered exotic words and ideas is actually a discourse of the survivors who try to deal with the new world, or exist between the two cultures. The significance of those words or ideas extends beyond their function as tools with which the daughters claim their authenticity, for the meanings change as the daughters undergo the process of coming to terms with their identity. To better understand that process I would like to explore how the daughters deal with Chineseness, which is represented not only as those Chinese heritages drawn from their mothers, but also as their ethnicity as it is perceived by the mainstream culture.

Chineseness as Metaphor

As some daughters in the novel nonchalantly say, it is somewhat popular to be ethnic American, at least, at the time of the novel’s publication in San Francisco. In response to a

Joy Luck mother, Ying-ying who insists on calling younger Chinese Americans by English names, Jing-mei says, “In fact, it’s even becoming fashionable for American-born Chinese to use their Chinese names” (37). Given the whole plot, in which Jing-mei learns the true meaning of her name, this use of Chinese names is merely a superficial cultural gesture. Lindo also remarks, “My daughter did not look pleased when I told her this, that she didn’t look Chinese. She had a sour American look on her face. Oh, maybe ten years ago, she would have clapped her hands – hurray! – as if this were good news. But now she wants to be Chinese, it is so fashionable” (253). This phrase “ten years ago” nods to the ease with which the mainstream perception of minorities changes and, therefore, how unstable their status is. Being Chinese American can even affect one’s body image and self-confidence. As Lena says, “I may not be a raving beauty, but a lot of women in my aerobics class tell me I’m ‘exotic’ in an unusual way, and they’re jealous that my breasts don’t sag, now that small breasts are in” (156). To some extent, Chineseness has only changed from social vermin of the 19th century to sexual exotica, and they are still culturally other.

In a world where being Asian can be fashionable or a source of self-confidence, while apparent racial ignorance and sexism carry through, what does it mean for a Chinese American woman to be Chinese? In terms of cultural translation, Jing-mei’s attempt to connect with China seems difficult. Although her mother tells her Chinese stories, she always changes the ending. Moreover, the most mysterious part, what happened to the twins, is never

revealed. Chinese details are forbidden for Jing-mei. It is little wonder that she had thought the Joy Luck Club was a Chinese version of a Ku Klux Klan meeting (28) when that forbidden past is strongly connected with a place called China. She also does not understand some Chinese phrases, as she admits in the first narrative (19). Jing-mei's connection with China is difficult to maintain on a cultural level. When it comes to the personal level, China is replaced by a Chinese mother. Her relationship with her mother is similar to that of the heroine's in *The Woman Warrior* in the way that they both struggle in the gap between the mothers' expectations and their own self-realization. Jing-mei's identity is formed through doing everything opposite her mother's expectations. It is as if she tried to stay away from anything Chinese, which is represented by her mother.

Their strained relationship is more about their cultural difference than about a simple generation gap. Suyuan, who lost all her family members in China, pins all her hopes on America, where she believes "you could be anything you wanted to be" unlike in old China (132), although this wistful hyperbole is a total fantasy. Among other issues, her comment overlooks that in America one also can be a disobedient daughter, which is totally out of Suyuan's cultural norm. Jing-mei, who always falls short of Suyuan's expectations and thus thinks she will never get approval from her, has low self-esteem. This is why, after Suyuan's death, she tries to see what her mother really meant when she gave her a jade pendant, a very Chinese present, before her death. Being of Chinese descent is not just political in the narrow

sense; for Tan's daughters it is also a metaphor of their personal struggle with their mothers, which is nonetheless political and informed by power structures. Chinese immigrants had to take menial jobs because of the racial stratification in the labor market, and, seeing their parents toiling around the clock, the second-generation children cannot disobey their parents. For this reason, they can never completely separate those two factors out of their relationships: personal problems have an inextricable political aspect. When they talk about their personal experience, they also talk about the political situation that frames the experience. Their personal experience reflects the political facets of their realities and becomes a metaphor of their political experience. Personal experience is not always written in the kind of political language that people can understand. It is written in emotional language that many people can relate to and makes them identify with characters and understand their realities. Tracing Jing-mei's narrative will help to demonstrate the ways in which they contend with this relationship between the personal and political, particularly in regard to their Chinese heritage.

Jing-mei's first narrative begins when Suyuan is dead and she has to replace her mother's seat in the regular mah-jong games held by the other mothers, called "aunties." As she remembers how her mother bickered with an auntie for bringing better soup to the games, she says, "She [Suyuan] said the two soups were almost the same, *chabudwo*. Or maybe she said *butong*, not the same thing at all. It was one of those Chinese expressions that mean the

better half of mixed intentions. I can never remember things I didn't understand in the first place" (19). Although she speaks Chinese, she does not recognize cultural ideas behind it. This minimal understanding does not mean she is free of the cultural influence or any of her mother's saying and doing, though. When she describes how the first Joy Luck Club was formed in China, retelling her mother's story in Kweilin, she says, "Over the years, she told me the same story, except for the ending, which grew darker, casting long shadows into her life, and eventually into mine" (21). A similar influence of the mother's stories is depicted in *The Woman Warrior*; the heroine says, "a curtain flapped loose in my brain" to describe how the stories affect her (*The Woman Warrior* 91). The mothers' stories directly and almost physically affect their daughters' lives and thoughts.

Then, why does she ignore the Chinese part of herself as if she did not recognize it? As for the Joy Luck Club, she says, "In those days, before my mother told me her Kweilin story, I imagined Joy Luck was a shameful Chinese custom, like the secret gathering of the Ku Klux Klan or the tom-tom dances of TV Indians preparing for war" (28). It is notable that she mentions stereotypical images of white supremacists and Native Americans as references to the Joy Luck Club. She sees her mother's mah-jong meetings as a racially "shameful" affair. Whether she is aware of it or not, she is ashamed of her Asian ethnicity, which is embodied by her mother's "Chinese" behaviors. As Fickle points out, the mothers in a mah-jong meeting are dressed in a "strange" way (Fickle 69): "She [Suyuan] and Auntie

An-mei were dressed up in funny Chinese dresses with stiff stand-up collars and blooming branches of embroidered silk sewn over their breasts. These clothes were too fancy for real Chinese people, I thought, and too strange for American parties" (28). It is likely that the mothers emphasize their Chineseness and act like rich people in order to reconfirm and celebrate their ethnic identity, which was so belittled in America during their process of assimilation, because later they changed their clothes to more Western ones such as "slacks" or "blouses" (28). Strangeness also refers to abnormality, which is linked with Chineseness; what is strange, in this case, is Chinese Americana. It is no surprise that she links this racialized abnormality with the KKK and the Indians' tribal dance.

In Tan's well-known essay, "Mother Tongue," she says she uses different types of English in and outside her family and does not like to describe the English in her family as "'broken' or 'fractured' English" (274). When she was younger, however, she was "ashamed of her [her mother's] English" (274). Tan says:

> I believed that her English reflected the quality of what she had to say. That is, because she expressed them imperfectly, her thoughts were imperfect. And I had plenty of empirical evidence to support me: the fact that people in department stores, at banks, and in restaurants did not take her seriously, did not give her good service, pretended not to understand her, or even acted as if they did not hear her. (274)

There is also a long list of shameful things Suyuan does, such as “haggling with store owners, pecking her mouth with a toothpick in public, being color-blind to the fact that lemon yellow and pale pink are not good combination for winter clothes” (267). In light of these embarrassing behaviors, she explains, “I had vigorously denied that I had any Chinese whatsoever below my skin. I was a sophomore at Galileo High in San Francisco, and all my Caucasian friends agreed: I was about as Chinese as they were” (267). Jing-mei wanted to be the same as her white friends. Being Chinese is to be her mother, who belongs to a culturally shameful class in America. “And when she [Suyuan] said this [“Someday you will see…. It is in your blood”], I saw myself transforming like a werewolf, a mutant tag of DNA suddenly triggered, replicating itself insidiously into a syndrome, a cluster of telltale Chinese behaviors, all those things my mother did to embarrass me …” (267). In her adolescence and under peer pressure, those “Chinese” behaviors of her mother “embarrassed” Jing-mei “in public,” so devastating her ethnic identity that she whitewashed her Asian identity. Just as “Chinese” characteristics such as talking loud annoy the heroine of *The Woman Warrior*, Jing-mei should have had a negative perspective on her own ethnicity. As a result, she wants to emphasize the fact that her Caucasian friends recognize her as their fellow, namely, a white. For Jing-mei, who chose to live as white in the name of being normal, being Chinese encodes her as a physiological anomaly, “a mutant tag of DNA” (267). It is inevitable, but Chinese are déclassé. It is as if she always awaited an ineluctable death sentence.

The negative images associated with being Chinese are based on more than her mother's peculiar behaviors. When she is younger, Jing-mei and Suyuan are keen on searching for a prodigy model for Jing-mei (134). In search of the right model, she thinks, "I was filled with a sense that I would soon become *perfect*" (133). The prodigy inside her talks to her: "If you don't hurry up and get me out of here, I'm disappearing for good…. And then you'll always be nothing" (133). For a Chinese girl, just being herself does not mean she is whole. The sense of lacking something is also mentioned by grown up Jing-mei, who says, "My mother and I never understood one another. We translated each other's meanings and I seemed to hear less than what was said, while my mother heard more" (37). As Walter Shear points out, "[g]enerally, the daughters tend to perceive cultural blanks, the absence of clear and definite answers to the problems of family, whereas the mothers tend to fill in too much, often to provide those kinds of cultural answers and principles that seem to empower them to make strong domestic demands on their daughters" (194). The Chinese mothers know too much, which troubles their American daughters, while the American daughters think they lack something cultural; they are made to feel handicapped on a cultural level. If they are not Chinese enough, they feel inferior to their mothers while if they are too Chinese, they feel alienated in American society. This sense of lack easily leads to a sense of inferiority, which becomes a source of self-loathing. Her search for a prodigy to model herself against reveals Jing-mei's hope to be culturally perfect in America while satisfying her mother's desire for

the American Dream.

At first, this search for a model resembles the world of the pre-Oedipal period, in which there is no difference between mother and child. Suyuan asks a question and Jing-mei is expected to provide the correct answer. They should share the same ideas about everything. Of course, it does not work that way, and every time she gives a wrong answer, “something inside of me [her] [begins] to die” (134). What dies inside her is the fantasy of being the perfect Chinese daughter whom her mother desires. She says, “I hated the tests, the raised hopes and failed expectations. Before going to bed that night, I looked in the mirror above the bathroom sink and when I saw only my face staring back – and that it would always be this ordinary face – I began to cry. Such a sad, ugly girl! I made high-pitched noise like a crazed animal, trying to scratch out the face in the mirror” (134). A mirror is a typical motif of the moment of self-recognition and identification (such as Lacan’s mirror stage), and what she sees first is a “sad, ugly girl,” a negative image of a Chinese girl. In this scene, the mirror is a sign of self-splitting: she recognizes herself not as she knows it, not as her mother wants her to be. She uses the same mirror image to reinvent herself:

> And then I saw what seemed to be the prodigy side of me – because I had never seen that face before. I looked at my reflection, blinking so I could see more clearly. The girl staring back at me was angry, powerful. This girl and I were the same. I had new thoughts, willful thoughts, or rather thoughts filled

> with lots of won'ts. I won't let her [Suyuan] change me, I promised myself. I won't be what I'm not. (134)

She uses her anger over her mother and being unable to be a perfect Chinese daughter in order to identify herself ("This girl and I were the same"). She decides to be who she sees in the mirror and not to be her mother's ideal. In this moment, she discovers her rebellious side and decides to disobey her mother. She says, "I failed her [Suyuan] so many times, each time asserting my own will, my right to fall short of expectations" (142). Jing-mei's subject is based on anger at her failed Asian body, and that means she is split between a failing self and one that is angry at that self.

Jing-mei's split self is reinforced by an incident: one day Suyuan is "entranced" by the music played by a Chinese a girl on TV (135). The girl has a Peter Pan haircut, which Jing-mei unintentionally had worn earlier in her life when Suyuan tried to make her look like Shirley Temple (another "remarkable" child), and the girl also "had the sauciness of a Shirley Temple. She was proudly modest like a proper Chinese child" (135). The girl is an epitome of a Chinese American girl. Suyuan hires an old guy to give piano lessons to Jing-mei, who is now utterly unwilling to learn the instrument. Refusing to identify herself with the girl, she fools the deaf old man and does not practice hard, only to end up in a fiasco at a talent show later. While practicing a piano piece called "pleading child" for the show, she "daydreamed about being somewhere else, about being someone else" (139). Again, she invents her other

self to escape the reality. She pleads with her mother to let her be as she is, not a piano genius.

At the talent show, despite her dislike of playing the piano, Jing-mei feels intoxicated by dressing in *white* on the stage ("I was caught up in how lovely I looked" (139)) and looking down at people ready to applaud her as a genius, until she hits a wrong note and everything collapses. This incident shows irresistibility of the perfect Chinese daughter fantasy for Jing-mei despite her loathing of it. Even after the blunder at the show, Suyuan does not give up the hope that her daughter may become a professional pianist. When Suyuan forces Jing-mei to practice the piano, she shouts back, "I wish I were dead! Like them [the babies Suyuan has lost in China]" (142). Immediately afterward, her ambivalence intensifies. She says, "As I said those things I got scared. It felt like worms and toads and slimy things crawling out of my chest, but it also felt good, as if this awful side of me had surfaced, at last" (142). These "slimy" things within herself uncannily resemble a "mutant tag of DNA" that waits in her body for its release (267). The DNA refers to her being Chinese, while the slimy things describe the American behavior of exerting her own will. Part of Jing-mei's identity, be it American or Chinese, is depicted as something horrible and scary within, which is active and lies in wait, threatening to emerge while the other self is active.

Jing-mei's internal division also informs the mother-daughter dyad. The struggle arises in her mother's assessment about what constitutes appropriate behavior from daughter

to mother. Suyuan says, “Only two kinds of daughters.... Those who are obedient and those who follow their own mind! Only one kind of daughter can live in this house. Obedient daughter!” (142). In this light, Jing-mei’s move to keep betraying her mother’s expectation is a sign of independence from her Chinese mother. However, her subject formation succeeds with a sense of guilt because she uses her mother’s trauma and continues to betray her to achieve the subject formation. Her independence is based on the sense that she had done a horrible thing to her mother, and because of the unspeakable Chinese story (the twins are not taboo, but Suyuan never discusses them in detail), Jing-mei never learns why her mother is so obsessed with having a prodigy. On Jing-mei’s thirtieth birthday, Suyuan surprises her with a piano as a gift, and she considers it “a shiny trophy I [she] had won back.” For the moment, it seems like bad feelings between them disappear (143). After her mother’s death, she plays the tune that she played at the talent show and another tune on the next sheet of that score, only to realize they are “two halves of the same song” (144). This realization is linked with the aforesaid Chinese expression that means “the better half of mixed intentions” (19), suggesting that Suyuan only hoped the best for her daughter even if she is one of the daughters “who follow their own mind.”

This redemptive ending still misses something: what happened to Jing-mei’s split self, the Chinese side of her? Even though her negative perspective on being Chinese American is not the subject of this piano chapter, these uncanny similarities between

dependence/independence and Chineseness/Americanness or abnormality/normality cannot be overlooked. If Chineseness is used as a metaphor of obedience, which is articulated only in a coming-of-age story, then how does she contend with Chineseness as abnormality?

Becoming Chinese

Unlike the heroine of *The Woman Warrior*, who tries to face her Chinese American identity by questioning it and trying to reconnect with China, Jing-mei appears to search for a solution to the conflict between herself and her deceased mother within her Chinese identity itself. This is also why critics tend to make slight of the novel: the resolution seems shallow when compared to that in *The Woman Warrior*. Jing-mei's search for her identity is embodied in the end of the novel when she visits China to meet the long lost twin sisters whom Suyuan had abandoned before coming to America. E.D. Huntley's view of this voyage shares a lot with those of other critics. She writes, "she [Jing-mei] journeys to her mother's ancestral homeland, China, and completes the circle of her heritage by claiming her Chinese half-sisters" (*Amy Tan* 73). Claiming her Chinese half-sisters is equated with claiming her Chinese identity, as if the sisters are the missing link of a "circle." Does Jing-mei appeal to the discourse of "authentic" Chinese that can be verified only through blood when she enters China and says "I am becoming Chinese" (267), thereby rediscovering the very Chineseness she has vigorously tried to deny? Her visit to China is almost depicted as her nostalgic return

to a motherland, even though she only knows of China from Suyuan's stories and from American-filtered resources. It is clear that this rediscovered Chineseness has nothing to do with those negative images she had of China, nor with the exotic representation of it in popular culture. Then, what does it mean to become Chinese? How can being a Chinese American daughter of Chinese immigrants' parents be explained and resolved?

As Deanna Fei observes when she differentiates her novel from Tan's, Jing-mei's visit to China at the end of the novel implies that the visit and reunion with her sisters is the goal and the purpose. But in the framework of the overall novel, there is more to this. Of Jing-mei's visit to China, Huntley says as follows:

> Jing-mei brings closure and resolution to her mother's story as well as to her own. For Jing-mei, the journey is an epiphany and a discovery of self: finally aware of her mother's meaning, she is able to give voice to Suyuan's story as well as to the story that they share as mother and daughter…. The aunties [of the Joy Luck Club] encourage Jing-mei to make Suyuan come alive for her other daughters through narrative. (48)

The moment or sign of the revelation comes as she and her father enter China. This is the first time she recognizes her Chinese identity:

> The minute our train leaves the Hong Kong border and enters Shenzhen, China, I feel different. I can feel the skin on my forehead tingling, my blood

> rushing through a new course, my bones aching with a familiar old pain. And I think, My mother was right. I am becoming Chinese.
>
> "Cannot be helped," my mother said when I was fifteen and had vigorously denied that I had any Chinese whatsoever below my skin … But today I realized I've never really known what it means to be Chinese. I am thirty-six years old. My mother is dead and I am on a train, carrying with me her dreams of coming home. I am going to China. (267-268)

Jing-mei at first literally interprets her mother's saying, "[o]nce you are born Chinese, you cannot help but feel and think Chinese…. Someday you will see…. It is in your blood, waiting to be let go" (267), and believes she might transform into a Chinese person as one transforms into a werewolf. Her bodily sensations of tingling forehead or blood rushing through veins surely evoke something like a werewolf transfiguration. But what is a "familiar old pain" exactly? Following the werewolf imagery, this would mean she was actually once a werewolf and the experience was painful for her. Right after she feels this pain, she remembers, "when I [she] was fifteen and had vigorously denied that I had any Chinese whatsoever below my skin. I was a sophomore at Galileo High in San Francisco, and all my Caucasian friends agreed: I was about as Chinese as they were" (267). As she mentions the pain, she remembers those high school days when she tried to become a white, to deny her Chineseness. The "familiar old pain" is like an old wound that still hurts, meaning that she

still has difficulty coping with that racial memory of denying her own Chinese identity.

This is also when she remembers the long list of embarrassing things her mother did, such as “haggling with store owners, pecking her mouth with a toothpick in public, being color-blind to the fact that lemon yellow and pale pink are not good combinations for winter clothes” (267). For Jing-mei, to become Chinese is to become like her mother, who is a cultural other of a shameful class in American society. This series of thoughts, combined with meeting the twins of her deceased mother as well as her denial of Chinese identity and rejection of her mother, suggest that her trip to China is her atonement for betraying her mother due to her ethnicity. Her betrayal of her mother ultimately leads to the betrayal inflicted on herself, her own self-hatred. Since the twins still do not know her mother’s death and Jing-mei has to tell them about her mother, she also tries to become her mother. Matrophobia is a fear of the maternal inside, and although Jing-mei never mentions her fear of having children, she is still afraid of becoming *like* her mother and doing some of the terrible things her mother did. Matrophobia in this case is mixed with racial inferiority and could be called matro-xenophobia. In her thirties, after the death of her mother, she somehow seems to have come to terms with her Chinese identity, and, at the same time, to overcome her matrophobia. Her expression “familiar old pain” indicates that she is still in the process of healing and leaving it behind. Becoming Chinese is not the natural or automatic change that she supposed it to be, but rather her intentional shift to resolve the complex web of her

mother and ethnic identity. It is a metaphor for her redemptive act to forgive herself for rejecting her mother and her ethnic identity.

Vision of Mother

Jing-mei's attempt to become her mother is predicted when she replaces her in her mother's seat of the mah-jong games, but what does this substitution really mean and is it really possible? As for Jing-mei's depiction of China, it is probably strongly affected by Tan's actual visit to China before writing the novel (Bloom, *Modern* 201). It is realistic and portrays the consumerist society of China full of commercial products, and American-born Jing-mei is surprised by the ubiquitous Western products. Unlike Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Tan's work is based on immediate information, her mother's stories, and historical studies of China (Huntley, *Amy Tan* 17). In this realistic China setting, becoming her own mother seems an unrealistic task.[14] In an effort to "revive" her mother, Jing-mei often imagines ("dreams" in her words) things her mother might do if she could see her twins (270) and repeatedly simulates the reunion scene with the twins; however, she always ends up imagining tragedy or disaster (270, 274).

Jing-mei enters China with her mother's unfulfilled dream and, despite her attempts, she still has no revelation about being Chinese. Her understanding of China is still quite superficial; she says, "This is more like it…. This is China" when she notices that the hotel's

shampoo's consistency and color is of hoisin sauce while remaining unimpressed by the hotel room filled with Western products, such as a remote-controlled color television, a marble walled bathroom, Heineken beer, Coke Classic, Seven-Up, Johnnie Walker Red, Bacardi rum, Smirnoff vodka, packets of M & M's and a *Travel & Leisure* magazine (278). Consumerist and commercialized China surprises Jing-mei, whose China is still the old, Asian country in Suyuan's stories. Her inflexible expectations about China indicate that she still clings to firm, if singular, understanding about her mother. Her fixation on old China is also apparent when she imagines the twins, older than her, to be babies or girls (269). In addition to this culture shock, she learns the origin of her name and the true story of how Suyuan abandoned the twins through her father, Canning. At this point, she realizes how much she has not known about her own mother, which makes her question her authenticity as a daughter and intensifies her anxiety about the meeting the twins. In fear of disappointing the twins and with her materialistic understanding of China, how can Jing-mei fulfill her mother's dream and learn what it is to be Chinese in the end?

To understand the last scene of Jing-mei's revelation, there is one Western product that disillusions Jing-mei's imaginary China in her mother's stories. This product, a Polaroid camera with its pictures, plays an important role at key moments. The gadget was quite popular during the 1980s, and it is no wonder she brings it with her for the trip. A camera in hands of Western travelers is usually considered to be a symbol of the (Western) gaze and

fixation on (non-Western) subjects, but the device here functions to connect subject and object. The first time it is introduced in the text is when Aiyi, Canning's auntie, finds him in the crowd of the train station in Guangzhou (273-74). She is able to find him easily because he sent the Polaroid picture of himself beforehand. Jing-mei also takes a picture of Canning and Ayiyi with the Polaroid camera. The next is when Jing-mei uses the camera to socialize with Lili, Aiyi's great-granddaughter. Jing-mei does not know much Cantonese and cannot communicate with Lili, but when she holds up the camera, Lili immediately strikes a pose and, by the time they leave the station, holds onto Jing-mei's hand (275). The third time is when the twins find Jing-mei at the Shanghai airport; they hold a Polaroid picture Jing-mei sent which helps them find Jing-mei. It is not mentioned who is in the picture, Jing-mei or Suyuan, but it helps the twins to identify Jing-mei. The last is when Canning takes a picture of Jing-mei and the twins (288).

The first thing we may notice about the function of Polaroid camera and its pictures is that it brings family members together regardless of time, space and language. As the first case shows, Aiyi reconnects with Canning through the picture even though they are thousands miles away and he has changed a lot. The second case reminds us that taking a picture with a Polaroid can function as an ice breaker activity for shy little Lili and Jing-mei. The most significant case is when Jing-mei and the twins somehow see their mother's face in theirs in the Polaroid picture (288). The camera and pictures connect and reconnect the family

members beyond generation, space and language. However, there is still more to these practical uses of the camera and pictures, and the significance lies in the introduction of a Polaroid camera, specifically. It is because the Polaroid camera was the handiest and easiest way to take pictures then. Moreover, in some cases, the process of developing the image can be more significant moment than the act of taking pictures. The brief moment in which images appear and figures become recognizable for themselves often occurs in important moments in this chapter.

Images developing are images in production, which is the opposite of fixed images. Stereotypical images are often used in the novel, such as Jing-mei's description of Suyuan, who does embarrassing or racially shameful things in private and public. Because she refers to KKK or Indian's tom-tom dances on TV in comparison to the Joy Luck Club, the representation of Chinese Americans is probably strongly influenced by mainstream description of them as mysterious and unassimilated. Jing-mei is ashamed of these images and of being a Chinese American. That is why she proclaims her whiteness in her high school days, in order to deny her Chineseness, which she knows cannot be denied so easily and returns to recognize the "werewolf" genes inside her. Unlike these images, the appearing images of the pictures are described as images in production. When she takes a picture of her father and his auntie, Jing-mei says, "Aiyi and my father still stand together, each of them holding a corner of the picture, watching as their images begin to form. They are almost

reverentially quiet" (274). Also, after Jing-mei takes a picture for Lili, she is "jumping and giggling every few seconds as she watches herself appear on the greenish film" (275). They are all anxious to see the development, waiting together. It is as if they were taking part in the process of development. These moments of anticipating the developing Polaroid pictures is likely about more than checking to learn whether pictures were successful, especially in the last scene.

When Jing-mei first sees the twins, she "sees" her mother (287) and remembers a childhood memory with her mother. It was when she was five and slept under the bed while her mother frantically looked for her, worrying that she was dead until she found Jing-mei. It is a memory of loss and recovery, indicating that this meeting of Jing-mei and the twins is also a reunion. This retrospection also suggests that Jing-mei and the twins can potentially connect through memories, although Jing-mei is afraid of disappointing the twins for not being able to tell the stories of her mother. When they finally meet and embrace each other, they "murmur," "'Mama, Mama,' as if she [Suyuan] is among us [Jing-mei and the twins]" (287). Jing-mei's plan to "resurrect" her mother is accomplished here because now she learns that these tiny bits of memories suffice to tell the stories of her mother. Then comes the moment of revelation to learn what it is to be Chinese. "My sisters look at me…. I look at their faces again and I see no trace of my mother in them. Yet they still look familiar. And now I also see what part of me is Chinese. It is so obvious. It is my family. It is in our blood.

After all these years, it can finally be let go" (287-88). Jing-mei sees the resemblance of her mother in the twins' faces and probably vice versa, but then again, they are still themselves. The first moment of the meeting is all about the images in a Polaroid picture in the twin's hand, their faces and a vision of their mother. The twins, of course, wanted to see their biological mother, and Jing-mei rediscovers her mother through her father's account of the twins. All three of them think about their mother, which leads to a moment when Suyuan might resurrect as an illusory image. The vision of her mother provides Jing-mei with a revised idea about being a Chinese American: it is to share memories as family. And as she released a suppressed Chinese part of herself, she finally accepts her Chinese identity, not as a media caricature, nor as a political category, but as a way to cherish personal memories with others. The novel provides further evidence that sharing memories does not mean fixing them in time and space:

> The flash of the Polaroid goes off and my father hands me the snapshot. My sisters and I watch quietly together, eager to see what develops.
>
> The gray-green surface changes to the bright colors of our three images, sharpening and deepening all at once. And although we don't speak, I know we all see it: Together we look like our mother. Her same eyes, her same mouth, open in surprise to see, at last, her long-cherished wish. (288)

Jing-mei and the twins not only participate in the development of the image, but they also

read more than the image as it is. They interpret the simple images of themselves and see their mother. This simple moment of looking at the emerging image is a moment of reconfiguration and redefinition.

For Jing-mei, the idea of being Chinese American has dramatically changed. It is no longer than the source of self-hatred. It is to share family memories. In contrast to the heroine of *The Woman Warrior* who incessantly self-interrogates and becomes melancholic, Jing-mei's management of her ethnic identity might be easy prey to the self-romanticization of Asian Americans as a successful second generation of immigrants, a myth of seamless Americanization. I can also understand some critics' annoyance at this easy solution to ongoing racial problems or the replacement of them with personal matters. Throughout the novel, the narrators constantly ask themselves what it means to be Chinese, and each time they conceive different answers to meet the context of the moments of their lives. It may seem haphazard and to give no solution or consolation to their racial matters. At worst, Jing-mei's solution could be considered avoiding the problem.

An alternative interpretation suggests that replacing or shifting is a way to reconfigure issues of race and avoid concretizing them as facts or truth, as if race were the only factor that defines a person. Jing-mei's solution seems based on biological facts, but since it is mostly about sharing memories and healing her traumatic experience, "Chinese" becomes a nominal definition, which could also annoy those who think that being Chinese American is a solid,

physical experience. “Chinese” is a tentative description, but a necessary modifier to define her personal experience and her identity because simply being “American” or “Asian” is not enough. Here she tries to redefine “Chinese” as something more than a nationality or a political and ethnic category. It does not mean that she forgets how she has been made to feel inferior as a Chinese American woman. She does not complain about the difficulties faced by ethnic Americans in political terms. Her comment about internal racism might be brief, but it is sufficient to recognize the degree to which she had been ashamed of her identity. Instead of overpoliticizing the matter and staking out a claim to her identity by insisting on the problems she faces as an individual, she starts to heal those traumatic wounds by sharing them. As she says “it [Chinese part of Jing-mei’s identity] can finally be let go” (288), for Jing-mei, be(com)ing Chinese is ultimately a personal act, which is performed inside her and no one would know unless she talks about it. I would say she becomes a Chinese, not as a narrow ethnic category, for she finally faces the traumatic moments of her life as a Chinese American woman. By sidestepping the racial issues, she has avoided her ethnic identity.

Jing-mei’s personalization of her experience is not a regressive manifestation of the famous slogan “the personal is political” because in this process, it is implied that she will share her memories with the twins. Of course, politicizing one’s traumatic experience is not always the way to overcome familial/cultural tensions, something that becomes evident when Jing-mei feels guilty for her mother’s death. Previously, her Chinese American identity had

been a source of self-hatred, but now she considers it to be more than an identity. It affords her a chance to share her memory and heal. As Jing-mei's father tells the story of the twins to reveal the meaning of Jing-mei's name, through sharing memories, she reconfigures her own idea of Chinese American identity as well as the images of her mother. At the same time, she can (finally) grieve for her mother. Jing-mei and the twins look at the picture and read more than the picture describes, thereby defying and even expanding the significance of the original. Their act of interpretation exceeds what is given, and this can be applied to their interpretation of their identities. Their Chinese and Chinese American identities are not defined entirely by blood, but also by shared memories. This ending, under the disguise of blood as the most important factor to define being Chinese, suggests that one can redefine their ethnic identity, just like "becoming," not being, Chinese.

Chapter 4: The Reconfiguration of Chinatown in Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*

Chinatown has been long a source of exotica and a variety of evil characters, organizations, and sinister plots in mainstream representation, such as Fu Manchu and the movie *Chinatown*. In addition to the white imagination, it has its own culture, one mainly inherited from old China and then transformed within Chinatown, which has contributed to ethnic solidarity while culturally binding its inhabitants, as the young heroine of *The Woman Warrior* often feels. Thus, in regard to leaving Chinatown, the heroine must confront conflicting emotions toward Chinatown, which is home for her, but in which she could not feel completely at home. Although leaving Chinatown is a common theme of Chinese American novels, the conceit risks being reduced to an ethnic drama that is convenient for a mainstream imagination in which ethnic minorities leave their backward space for the enlightened world outside, America, as if they finally gain legal citizenship when they enter the outer society. Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* might be just another story of leaving Chinatown, but it also challenges and frustrates readers by not giving full explanations for everything, such as the reason for the heroine's sister's suicide, as if it defies readers who want to enjoy the text merely as Chinatown tourists. The heroine, Leila, also tries to revisit her Chinatown memories to reconfigure them in order to free herself from their double binding: the mainstream stigma and its cultural codes. Her narrative and strategy are different from those

of Kingston or Tan, whose narratives are often colored with manifold images of old China that could easily be identified with Hollywood-made images of China/Chinatown. She critically describes Chinatown with the whitewashed images of Chinatown in mind, and, in this critical narrative, reconsiders the cultural image of her mother, Mah, in relation to herself and other family members. In this chapter, I will analyze the ways in which Leila remembers and reconstructs her experience in order to glimpse the world beyond cultural filters while maintaining a historical ethnic bond that serves as a guide for her life as a Chinese American woman.

Bone tells the story of Leila Fu, the daughter of Chinese immigrants. As she searches for the cause of her half-sister Ona's suicide, she finally resolves to leave San Francisco Chinatown. Struggling between her desire to leave Chinatown and her filial duty to stay with her mother, Leila tries to demystify the dismal and melancholic image of Chinatown and solve the conflict between her and the other members of her family. With discord between Mah and her stepfather, Leon; her rebel, second half-sister Nina; and her obedient half-sister, Ona, her family relationship becomes complicated. Even her fiancé, Mason, does not solve the problem. Despite its misogynistic culture, Leila does not completely hate Chinatown. For example, she likes an "old-style" café in Chinatown that is also a tourist attraction for "the Greyhound tour crowds" (8). On the other hand, she wants to "forget. The Blame. The pressing fear" (51) once she is outside Chinatown and free from Mah and Leon. Chinatown is

represented as a melancholic, yet comfortable cage she hesitates to leave. Her hesitation arises from both a personal issue and a cultural one. The plot line of a daughter leaving Chinatown is a common theme in Chinese American women writers' texts, but Leila in *Bone* takes a different path to depart from Chinatown in terms of how she deals with her Chineseness or her Chinese American identity. As Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong comments, "it resists reducing the act of leaving home to a formulaic American ethnic drama" ("Ethnic Subject" 260).

Leila is often in dilemmas as to whether she should choose one over the other. She is an Asian American woman and, like other Chinese American heroines, often works as a translator for her Chinese immigrant parents (15). She also works as "the bridge between classroom teacher and the parents" (14) and finds herself in conflict between her personal desire outside Chinatown and her filial duty inside it, "being pulled back and forth between Mah and Mason" (47). She especially struggles with Mah, represented as a typical, hard-working Chinese immigrant and an officious Chinese mother. Because of the arduous life Mah has led for the family, Leila feels guilty about leaving Chinatown, which would mean abandoning Mah to her irritable, common-law husband. Leon is an illegal immigrant usually working out at sea while wanting to secure a job on land. Because of the difficulty of finding a job while being unrecognized as a citizen, he has become resentful and feels betrayed by America. While Leila manages to get along with Leon and tells him about her

marriage with Mason, Mah is the last to learn about it, which indicates Leila's strained relationship with Mah.

Leila cannot leave Chinatown unless she is secure about Mah's life with Leon. Her hesitation to leave Mah results from past tragic events, such as Mah's affair, a failure of the family business, Ona's suicide—the reason for which remains unknown—and the subsequent collapse of the family, which led to Leon's moving out and Nina's leaving for New York. These misfortunes often stem from the family's poverty, which is clearly the result of racial discrimination in the American labor market. The brunt of Leon's anger is borne out in Ona's personal life, and then the most tragic incident of her suicide happens. Leila's hesitation to leave Chinatown reflects her reluctance to leave Mah alone in a space filled with horrible memories. It is possible to say that her hesitation may be resolved only when she recognizes Mah's own desire to stay in Chinatown with Leon. The process leading to such a realization is fraught, however, for Leila has seen Mah toiling around the clock all her life. Many Chinese immigrant parents are supposed to give their children a better life, and their self-sacrificing image is widespread in the representation of Chinese immigrant mothers. This is partly because such an image meets the American myth of Asian Americans as a model minority that works hard despite racial discrimination and eventually achieves the success of American dreams. This persistent image of Chinese immigrants exacerbates Leila's struggle to recognize what Mah really wants.

Unlike the heroine of *The Woman Warrior*, who has to recognize her mighty mother as a victim to disentangle her mother from mysterious Chinatown, Leila has to recognize Mah's own choice in order to uncouple her from dismal Chinatown. To separate Mah from Chinatown is also to demystify Chinatown itself. One way for Leila to reconfigure the negative image of Chinatown is to investigate and unpack her memory of Mah and discern how such an image has been constructed. Deconstruction of Chinatown is symbolized in the novel's ending by Leila's neologism, "backdaire" (191), an expression based on a handwritten address of her parents' house, and pronounced as a Chinese-accented "back there." The expression rejects the dichotomies and alternatives and embraces the seemingly conflicting factors in herself while it avoids a definite answer that could be easily reduced to a signifier of model minority myth because it contains and conveys two meanings or stories, such as speaking English but not fluently, or living in America, but not an American (just an illegal inhabitant), or coming to America to make money as promised, but still in poverty. Thus it provides complex realities of Chinese Americans and rejects model minority myth of American Dream. In this reading, the equivocal, open ending should be understood as Leila's tactic to negotiate with her reality, which is always under pressure to immobilize and categorize certain images of her ethnic body according to the binaries of mother/father and Asian/American, a tension that perpetuates the unfair (as opposed to unequal) relationship between them. The following section will discuss the novel's critical description of

Chinatown and analyze the sisters' representations to show Leila's attempt to differentiate Chinatown stories from the mainstream representations of them.

Behind the Stage: Chinatown Stories

Leila depicts Chinatown as a traditional, old space that even she as a Chinese American does not understand. Juliana Chang writes in her analysis of *Bone*, "Rather than a site of regeneration … San Francisco's Chinatown proves to be the site of loss and melancholia" (110-11). The first thing a reader learns about the place is that it is disciplined by traditional Chinese standards, such as privileging and prioritizing sons over daughters. However, it is also depicted differently from the stereotypical space filled with dragons or Chinese peony flowers. The first place a reader visits in the novel is the messy room of an "old-man hotel" (2) filled with old, useless junk, such as "[s]tacks of takeout containers, a pile of aluminum tins. Plastic bags filled with packs of ketchup and sugar. White cans with red letters, government-issue vegetables: sliced beets, waxy green beans squash … towers of Styrofoam cups, stacks of restaurant napkins, and assorted fast-food straws" (3). It is a place disorderly still dominated by traditional beliefs, and the narrator is annoyed by it. This description of the scattered "ding[y]" room is the backstage of Chinatown, which is later depicted as a colorful and theatrical place (2). Leila's narrative thus strategically leads readers to see things differently, a course the novel follows as a whole; she will not use clichéd

representations of Chinatown to tell her stories.

Leila's strategic narrative becomes clearer when her personal problems threaten her public life. As she feels that her privacy is threatened by the Chinatown tourists, she juxtaposes her "inside story" with the decorative surface of Chinatown, and implies that there is a reality behind the theatrical surface of Chinatown for its inhabitants that the tourists never know. Right after Leila tells her parents about Ona's suicide, in the car heading to their Chinatown home, she states:

> From the low seats of the Camaro, I looked out at the streets and saw the spidery writing on the store signs, the dressed-up street lamps with their pagoda tops, the oddly matched colors: red with green, green with aqua blue, yellow with pink.
>
> Looking out, I thought, So this is what Chinatown looks like from inside those dark Greyhound buses; this slow view, these strange color combinations, these narrow streets, this is what tourists come to see. I felt a small lightening up inside, because I knew, no matter what people saw, no matter how close they looked, our inside story is something entirely different. I knew the dangers of closing up, but I didn't care. Right then, I didn't want people looking at us. I wanted to slide down deeper into myself; I wanted to hide from everything. I dreaded telling

> Mah and Leon, and now it was done. I dreaded telling Nina, but that too would soon be over with, and then what? What would we do after telling? We'd bury Ona; we'd mourn Ona. And then what? (141-42)

Leila tries to represent Chinatown differently from its mainstream representations. When she asks, "What would we do …?" she implies that there are other people watching her family, expecting what comes next. Leila's description of the decorative, colorful images of Chinatown recalls how Chinatown is made into a theatrical space for the tourists' optical pleasure. She only mentions buildings or streets, but actual people living there also could be part of that exotic image of Chinatown. When she says, "I didn't want people looking at us," however, Leila resists allowing her private story and reality to be exoticized for the tourists' curiosity. "[A] small lightening up inside" is a sign of her emergent resistance not to be part of the exoticized scenery of Chinatown, which is made only to be consumed by the tourists' curiosity.

Leila's resistance narrative is also told through representations of her two half-sisters, revealing the importance they play in her decision to leave Chinatown. Leila's two half-sisters, Ona and Nina, each symbolize her filial duty and her personal desire, but she cannot follow either sister's path. If she follows Ona, who is trapped in conflict between her boyfriend and her parents, she might wind up committing suicide because she is also in a relationship with a man, Mason. Nor can she follow Nina, who leaves and abandons

Chinatown because Leila cannot leave Mah alone in Chinatown. In order to survive, she has to narrate a story that is different from those of Ona and Nina.

Ona is characterized by her suicide and is depicted as a suffering daughter in conflict between her Chinese-Peruvian boyfriend, Osvaldo, and her father. Osvaldo is the son of Leon's business partner, who eventually betrays him and destroys the business. Leon refuses his daughter to continue seeing Osvaldo after the betrayal renders him the traitor's son. Ona was very fond of her father, makes the situation all the more difficult for her. Even after Ona broke up with Osvaldo, her dilemma was not resolved. Leila says, "In the end Ona felt disappointed by Leon and betrayed by Mah. Why hadn't Leon seen his selfishness? Why hadn't Mah come to Ona's defense?" (109). Ultimately, her boyfriend and parents could not save her. As Ona's fate indicates, for Asian American women figures, traditional narrative endings of marriage or relationships with males are not available as drastic and radical ways to deal with and eventually escape Chinatown. When everyone is somehow connected with one another, no one is free from the bonds of Chinatown. This rule even applies to Mason, who is also a Chinese American but avoids all the "Chinesey" things. Especially for Asian American children who feel an obligation to their parents for their hard work, leaving Chinatown can be a difficult task. When they are obedient and attached to their parents like Ona, who counts days until Leon comes home, the task is excruciating.

Ona's suicide could be read as a warning to Leila, who is in relationship with Mason,

who wants to live with her outside Chinatown. The straightforward logic of a fairytale, a plot in which the prince carries the heroine away from her plight, does not work here. Mason, who is affable and attractive to Mah and Leon, might be too good to be true; hence, Leila must take care not to totally depend on him for her own liberation. She cannot adopt the romantic love ideal to escape from her guilty sense of ignoring her filial duty. She, who is trapped between her parents and Mason, must recognize her own good cause and desire to leave Chinatown in order to avoid the dilemma. If she makes Mason her main motive to leave her parents, she will feel guilty for leaving them behind because even now she feels uneasy in another city's Chinatown. She wants to leave Chinatown, but since Ona's death, she learns that she cannot exaggerate her affection for Mason as an excuse to leave Chinatown. To become aware of her own desire to leave Chinatown is a way to avoid this politically constructed conflict between caring about one's parents and seeking one's own self-realization. In addition to her reason to leave Chinatown, how she leaves also matters, and it is anticipated in the way that sister Nina left for New York.

Nina, who has left Chinatown, works as a tour guide and lives in New York, a location that represents physical distance as well as freedom from Chinatown. As a tour guide, she "travels light" physically and also spiritually. She has an abortion, which makes her parents disown her and which characterizes her as a rebel daughter in contrast to obedient Ona. Indeed, the abortion may be understood as another expression of physical and psychological

freedom from Chinatown's traditional standards. Literary critic Phillipa Kafka, in her treatment of Leila as a "syncretizer," depicts Ona and Nina as the old and the new, and assigns negative characteristics to them: Ona fails to survive the conflict and Nina irresponsibly flees from her filial duty. Kafka then criticizes Nina's choice to leave Chinatown as follows (56): "She [Ng] answers the question for all her characters as to whether they need to continue to collaborate willingly or not, consciously or not, with patriarchy; whether they should kill themselves like Ona, or cut themselves off from it entirely like Nina (whose endless affairs and abortions symbolize Myenne Ng's negative response to this solution)" (76). Kafka continues, "The struggle that she seems unaware of, the feminist struggle, has also made it possible for Nina to have her abortion, to tell about it and live, and continue living without being 'a tragedy queen'" (54). According to Kafka, Nina is a "postfeminist" (59) who is ungrateful for feminists' longtime struggle. Insofar as Nina's example is an impetus for Leila's decision to marry Mason in New York, Nina should not be rejected out of hand as a totally negative, ungrateful woman of the postfeminist generation. It seems more helpful, instead, to consider Nina's case as one drastic way to survive and escape Chinatown. Her abortion could also be read as resistance to the traditional representations of tragic, victimized Asian women who commit suicide with their babies or have abortions, as seen in *The Woman Warrior* and *The Joy Luck Club*. It is not a negative decision that should be abhorred and criticized, as securing and when necessary exercising

the right to abortion is a goal of many feminists. She is a positive representation of an Asian American woman who must be “deranged” to have an abortion and still leads the life she wants.

Nina’s flight from Chinatown seems especially irresponsible to Leila, who makes every effort to support the collapsing family. Leila blames and envies Nina for her escape, but Nina is not just Leila’s enemy. She is the only sister left with whom Leila could share the memory of Ona as survivors in Chinatown. After Ona’s suicide, Leila and Nina visit Ona’s workplace, a club where she worked as a hostess. Nina recalls, “Ona could keep a secret better than anybody,” and Leila answers, “We’re all pretty good at it” (108-9). Keeping secrets is a sad skill learned in the taboo-filled Chinatown family constructed in response to the Chinese Exclusion Act, a law whose provisions for deporting Chinese immigrants subjects families to the arbitrary terror of sudden rupture . Secrecy is one of the persistent motifs in Asian American texts, which reflect the historical fact of the Act. It functions differently here than in *The Woman Warrior*, however. Shiham Arfaroui argues that, unlike *The Woman Warrior*, which stigmatizes secrecy as disempowering the heroine, Leila’s narrative strategically manipulates secrecy in order to protect herself (5-6). Leila’s narrative, which maintains secrets, such as the reason for Ona’s suicide, frustrates readers as voyeurs who feed on Chinatown’s exotic dramas and never consider the cause of the secrecy. Leila can confide only in Nina to share the painful memories of the family as American-born

children, another “inside” story that does not usually surface to mainstream representations of Asian Americans. Secrecy is key to healing their traumas, but without Nina this healing process does not work.

Leila, however, does not adopt Nina’s strategy for leaving Chinatown because she feels guilty for leaving Mah in it. She also cannot choose the middle way between the two sisters. If Ona’s suicide is the ultimate consequence of being an obedient daughter who complies with Chinatown’s patriarchal codes, Nina’s abortion could be that of disobedience. But unlike Ona, Nina survives, and this asymmetry makes it difficult to place Leila in the middle way, or Leila as a “syncretizer” according to Kafka’s argument (56).

Rather than confine herself to a spectrum bounded by the suicide and the runaway, let alone just remaining in Chinatown, Leila unpacks the discourse of Chinatown that psychically binds her to Mah through the daughter’s guilty conscience. She revisits her memory of Chinatown and searches out other sides of Chinatown and other faces of Mah, which are not easily reduced to the unfortunate images of Chinatown and Chinese immigrant women. She tries to view the family history from another perspective, to recreate that history. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong comments that Asian Americans are “ghettoized spiritually and/or physically” in Chinatown (*Reading* 44), which, by extension, means that Chinese American figures’ departure from Chinatown also carries the two-fold meaning.

Racial Mother

Since Mah is an Asian American, it is a glaring question in an argument about mother-daughter relationships to ask how race might function in her representation. If certain meanings engraved in her body pertain to physical "Asian" features, what do they mean? What is the cultural mask that Mah wears? The metaphor, mask, refers to the representations impressed on Chinese immigrant mothers. This is an argument similar to Judith Butler's idea of gender as performance. That is to say, wearing a mask does not mean that one can change his or her mask if one does not like it. Cultural meanings written on the body are internalized and externalized, and as a result, a mask eventually becomes one's flesh, an inseparable part of one's identity. Yoonmee Chang using queer theory presents us with an insightful view of how race functions in *Bone*. She situates the parameter of race within Lee Edelman's idea of a reproductive futurism that is based on heterosexuality and is embodied in the Child, the abstract, imaginary children for which every political movement fights. He problematizes the prevailing tendency in political motives to "fight[] for children" who are on "the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention" (Edelman 3). In considering why Leon insists that Ona should stop seeing Osvaldo, the son of a Chinese-Peruvian interracial marriage, Chang argues that in Chinatown "the political future is calibrated by a 'racial Child' … the fantastical figure of racial, cultural, and ethical purity … that promises cultural-ethical purity" (103). Her argument here focuses

on Leon's self-justification for condemning Ona for carrying on a relationship with a "mongrel," but I would like to shift focus onto Mah, who actually reproduced "racially pure children." If a "racial Child" is a fantastical figure, the mother of a "racial Child" can be defined on an epistemological level.

Mah is depicted as a typical Chinese immigrant mother who works hard and sacrifices herself in order to enable her children to have a better life. A self-sacrificing mother who bears racially pure children is a coveted image among Asian Americans as a model minority and satisfies codes of racial desire for political solidarity based on blood. If such an image of an ethnic mother is, therefore, firmly linked to the racial Child, she also must be racially "pure," thus idealized. In addition to her linkage to a racial Child, it was difficult for many Chinese American males then to have an ideal nuclear family in Chinatown because of the unbalanced gender ratio (Mah has two choices for her husband: Tommy Hom and Leon). The women who could be wives and future mothers were scarce, but much needed. When items, even people, become scarce, they also become privileged, specifically, sacralized and idealized. This is what happened to women in Chinatown. Within these narrow constraints, if a woman cannot secure a place as a mother, she may end up in a shameful position. Thus, immediately after Mah learned that she was abandoned by her first husband she accepted Tommie Hom's offer to take care of her (185). She had to avoid being stigmatized as a fallen woman. Such an imaginary Chinese mother, which many Chinese women aspire to be,

following Chang, could be called “racial Mother.” It functions as an accepted image of woman-to-be-mother and connects Chinese American children to their filial duties with an emotional bind.

The widespread representations of Chinese immigrant mothers are doubly constructed by the racist majority and the Chinese immigrant societies, and thus it is difficult for Leila to recognize Mah’s personal needs beyond the culturally distorted image. Indeed, she almost falls into the logic of the pre-discursive maternal space, which is based on the Freudian concept of the pre-Oedipal era, and construed as an imaginary space in which mother-child conflicts do not exist. In Freud’s concept of the mother, she is an obstacle that a child must overcome. Even though the Freudian mother seems in conflict with racial Mother, both of the mothers are based on the mother’s idealized and imaginary status. Mah, who lives in Chinatown, is supposed to wear the mask of these imaginary mothers who remain in the imaginary space (in Freudian theory, it is the infant’s unrecognizable past, and in the space of Chinatown, it is the fantasy of a racially pure space), not in the material, physical reality where she could be an agent. Leila robs Mah of her agency by regarding her as a racial Mother. However, in her narrative, which traces back the memories of her family, she tries to reexamine Mah as a person, not the image. She almost descends into the logic of confining her mother within the idealized mother image at the end of the novel, when she finally decides to leave Chinatown to live with Mason. She remembers a welcome-home dinner set

by Mah for Leon. The dinner scene is the family's happy memory, which is contrasted to the family's present problematic state. She says, "I listened to us eating–Mah and Leon, Mason and me–the soft suck of rice in our mouths, the click of the chopsticks against bowls. These sounds were comfortable, and for a moment, I was tempted to fall back into the easiness of being Mah's daughter, of letting her be my whole life" (190). Leila does not listen to specific spoken words, but only the sounds of their eating, and the comfortable sounds are directly associated with Mah because Mah is the one who made the dinner; but there is also an implication of the maternal. Eating is a very intimate activity because it is based on the trust that the food is not harmful or poisoned by the cook. Eating Mah's food asserts that there is actually an intimate relationship between Mah and Leila. In particular, the phrase, "soft suck … in our mouths," implies the mother's breastfeeding. Even if some people no longer favor the practice, it remains one of the most predominant images of mothers. Falling back into "the easiness of being Mah's daughter," which is represented only by sounds, suggesting a suspension of other bodily senses and potentially Leila's regression, could be construed as the state of being back in the womb, where she can let Mah be her "whole life" and obscure the division between mother and daughter. In a state like the pre-Oedipal phase, there is no language to enunciate the distinct positions of subject and object. If one is not formed as a subject, there will be no conflict. The suspension of this kind of tension would be especially tempting for Leila, who struggles for autonomy in the collapsing family. Although Chinatown

is not always depicted as a pleasant space, it is represented here as an idealized, alluring maternal space in which the mother may bring her daughter and make her forget the problems arising from being an individual.

Images of food in Asian American parent-child relationships have more ominous connotations than regressive mother-daughter symbiosis. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong reveals the harmful side of mother-daughter symbiosis, an issue that idealistic feminist readings often overshadow. Wong proposes the shocking idea of a cannibalistic image of filial sacrifice for the parents in Asian American literature, arguing that the immigrants' children are symbolized as food for their parents in an ethnic foodways motif:

> The American-born children often have reservation about the parents' food choices (and by implication their life choices); they identify with the creatures slaughtered for food; they experience the parents' attempt to pass on the doctrine of usefulness as a kind of force-feeding; and, most distinctively for this body of works, they frequently feel themselves sacrificed – made into a food source – for the parents. (37)

As an example, Wong analyzes a scene from "A Red Sweater," written by Fae Myenne Ng and later turned into *Bone* (32). In the scene, the mother sucks on bones so that her daughters can eat the rest of the meaty parts. Wong argues that the mother's self-sacrifice implicitly demands the same from the children in return. In what follows, I will explore how this

vicious cycle of “Quasi-Cannibalism” affects the daughters in *Bone* (Wong 31).

Despite their attempts to stop themselves from engaging in such self-denial, Leila and Nina realize that they cannot help acting like their mother as they stingily eat at a modern restaurant outside New York Chinatown (28-30). Leila remembers that they picked up some doves as pets, but later they turned into squabs, that is, Mah cooked them and they ate them literally to the bone as directed by Mah. The experience indicates that a person can eat what she raises and, ultimately, that parents may eat their own children. This cannibalistic image extends beyond self-sacrifice, for it also signals that the way the parents live can be inherited by their children. Leila says, “I thought about how we were sisters. We ate slowly, chewing like old people; it was a way to fool the stomach. Our way of making things last” (30). “Old people” include Mah, who “always sat alone in the kitchen sucking out the sweetness of the lesser parts” (28). Parents’ self-sacrifice for the children’s better future ironically binds them through a sense of guilt. In the dinner scene that Leila remembers just before she finally leaves Chinatown, a cannibalistic image of breastfeeding reappears as Leila’s willingness to give herself to Mah as a vital energy resource, which can be interpreted as the literal sacrifice of her life for Mah. The mother’s demand for the children’s sacrifice is another image of racial Mother because it is also based on its cultural representation with historical weight. A dutiful daughter who sacrifices herself for her parent is also a cultural image of a good Chinese daughter and Chinatown’s culture is historically preserved within America for a

political reason of ghettoization of Chinese Americans.

Representing a daughter as a Chinese American woman who is willing to be a passive subject staying in Chinatown is problematic because it reinforces and naturalizes the representation of Chinese American women as being voluntarily victimized and ghettoized in Chinatown. Worse still, the image both contributes to and veils the economic exploitation of Asian American women by ascribing this disenfranchised position to them as their natural condition and thereby justifies the ghettoization of Asian Americans in general. By using the contradictory term, “voluntarily victimized,” I mean that the victimization of Asian American women is partly attributed to their own acceptance of their victimized state as a cultural norm inherited from their native countries. By placing Leila’s departure from Chinatown at the end, Ng’s text implicitly rectifies such representations by providing an image of a woman who can ultimately reject her suicidal filial duty.

The identification of Chinatown with the maternal space and of the mother with the taboo demand of filial sacrifice is a cultural image that forms the foundation of the child’s imagination and animates the sense of guilt that arises when she consider leaving her self-sacrificing mother. The child refuses to recognize the mother’s pain as belonging to an “other,” and through this identification with the mother, the child may avoid recognizing her separate identity. What prevents Leila from seeing Mah beyond the culturally distorted image of her is thus her identification with Mah, a figure who is in accord with the cultural

image of racial Mother. When Leila keeps news of her marriage from Mah, she assumes that learning about her marriage with Mason would make Mah feel more miserable (10). Leila thinks that she knows her mother very well, and that her marriage would make Mah remember the misfortune of her own two marriages. Because Leila only sees Mah through the cultural filter, however, she does not take into account Mah's own idea of happiness. She identifies her own family's misfortune with Chinatown's gloomy atmosphere, and also identifies that condition with Mah's own emotional state. This association is possible because Mah is firmly associated with Chinatown, whereas her biological father has had another life in Australia, and Leon is usually at sea. Her view of Chinatown as maternal space is embodied in a conversation between Leon and Mah. He says, "You don't know. You're inside Chinatown; it's safe. You don't know. Outside, it's different" (178). His remarks about Chinatown are interesting because even to him, Chinatown is associated with safety and constancy, which could be another word for "ease," and staying in Chinatown is equated with remaining ignorant. Chinatown is represented as a backward place personified by Mah, who stays "inside," in charge of the safe place, and demands that the daughters do the same.

The self-sacrificing mother is, however, not the whole picture of Mah. As her memory of the past comes into clearer view, Leila probes her past in search of Mah and what she encounters enables her to realize that Mah is not always racial Mother. In her effort to reconcile with her past, she tries to see Mah against the culturally constructed image of the

Chinese mothers. Wong writes, “To me, the motif of quasi-cannibalism is most intriguing when read against the ‘model minority’ thesis, which while invoking the American immigrant myth, assiduously searched traditional Asian cultures for clues to the Asian American success story” (37) because it has a possibility to demystify the Asian immigrant family as a “greatly romanticized institution” (38) that produces successful children living American Dreams. Quasi-cannibalism is a symptomatic image of Asian American children who struggle between filial duties and personal achievements; thus it discloses a gap between Asian American realities and its mainstream representations. From this perspective, as long as Leila eats Mah’s offering of meaty parts and continues to internalize and reproduce the culturally informed meanings about the Asian American maternal, she maintains a sense of guilt. She has to reconsider Mah outside of Chinatown’s Confucian code of filial duty, that is, she must come to understand Mah’s affection for her in a way that resists the narrow reading produced through the cultural filter. In other words, she has to recognize Mah’s love for her children and her choice to stay in Chinatown according to Mah’s own experience and beliefs, not her own. Indeed, Mah does not embody the racial Mother who contributes to racial solidarity and upholds the American model minority myth. In the following section, I will analyze how Leila remembers and recognizes Mah’s subjectivity as distinct from her own.

Erotic Maternal Body

As she revisits Ona's suicide, Leila also remembers events that shed new light on images of Mah and seem to defy the codes of racial Mother. Mah's husband could migrate to America because he forged his birth certificate that said he was a son of a man who lives in America. This man is his father but only on paper. (This was a common way for immigrants to migrate, especially in San Francisco because all the paperwork was lost in the 1906 earthquake.) When Mah's paper father-in-law dies, she has to arrange a funeral for him by herself because Leon is at sea, and she eventually collapses under the weight of the responsibilities. Leila watches Mah break down at work and says, "Seeing Mah in Tommie Hom's arms, I knew there was more to it than just finding Grandpa Leong. It had to do with Leon being gone so much, it had to do with the monotony of her own life. It wasn't just death that upset Mah, it was life, too" (79). Tommie Home is Mah's boss, with whom she once had an affair. Diane LeBlanc regards Mah's affair as a kind of "resistance" (15) that problematizes the typical representation of Chinese immigrant women. She argues, "Mah rejects the terms of her role as a green card wife when she seeks personal fulfillment beyond the given parameters of that identity. Ng's creation of a more complex, realistic character challenges the stories which comprise Leila's cultural history. Mah's social failure offers hope for Leila through a different, albeit difficult, story" (16). Whereas LeBlanc's reading ascribes merely an affirmative meaning of "Mah's social failure," the affair nonetheless reveals Mah's sexuality and exposes the desire hidden beneath the cultural image of the faithful Chinese

mother. The episode of Mah's affair reveals her erotic body, which exists for her own desire and for which she seeks "personal fulfillment" beyond the prescribed codes for Chinese women. This erotic maternal body deviates from the typical image of the self-sacrificing immigrant mother and the goal-oriented green card wife. Although the choice brings her a miserable result in the collapse of her family, for Leila it opens another possibility for a Chinese woman's life, one in which she can claim agency.

This memory leads Leila to another private moment of Mah. To ignore a mean colleague's superficial sympathy, Mah sews "harder" in the sweatshop (79). Leila also sews "hard" after she and Mah fight (66). Sewing is one of the few activities that Leila and Mah share. When Leon refuses to attend his welcome home dinner, which Mah intends to be her apology for cheating on him, Mah retreats into her room and sews alone. Listening to the sound of Mah's sewing machine, Leila says, "I heard it. The rattle and groan of the old Singer…. What was Mah feeling now? What did she regret? Tommie Hom? My father? Leon? How did Ona weigh on her heart?" (67). She even "listened hard" and hears "a tinny hollowness," figuring out that "Mah was running the Singer without any fabric" (67). This "hollowness" might mean Mah's disconsolation, but it also implies that Leila has no idea of what Mah is thinking of. The mystery of Mah's thoughts is another sign that she is not always someone whom Leila could understand, and therefore who can slip out from under the cultural image of the Chinese mother.

Unlike the dinner scene where she fantasizes an all-welcoming mother without imagining what Mah thinks, Leila here does try to imagine her mental state. In both dinner scenes, she listens to the sound of the family chewing rice and to the sound of the sewing machine. Unlike the convivial feelings associated with sharing a meal, the latter image recalls the family's history of struggle. Mah brings her work back home and makes Leila help her. Child labor at home in Chinese American communities was not rare then, and sewing "harder" represents how socioeconomic situation of Chinese Americans forms their private lives. The time a mother and a daughter spend together in this situation is not "quality" time but rather a time of extra labor, and that is the only thing they share. Child labor also reveals a gap between the racial Mother and Mah. While the racial Mother sacrifices herself for her children, what Mah does actually sacrifices her daughters. It discloses the fantasy behind the racial Mother for in reality, many Chinese immigrants had to sacrifice their children's opportunities for leisure, play, and even study due to their lowly socioeconomic positions. In this view, the sound of the sewing machine helps Leila see Mah beyond cultural image of Chinese mothers. As in the dinner scene at the end, Leila's imagination remains informed by sounds, but here she resists thinking of Mah in the frame of racial Mother. She tries to re-imagine Mah as a person and in terms of her relationships with others, such as her first husband, Ona, Leon or even Tommie Hom, in other words, in terms of her connection to reality.

Yoonmee Chang finds another erotic representation of Mah, in the friendship between Mah and Rosa, the Peruvian wife of Leon's deceitful business partner, Luciano. Leila recalls, "Mah and Rosa were like sisters. They joked that they sewed more than they slept, and sewing side by side, they were more intimate with each other than with their husbands" (161). Their relationship is, however, more substantive than mere joking because Mah's relationship with others suggests that she had an intimate relationship outside the family. Chang says that "they are queer sisterhoods. This is intimated in the erotic charge of Mah and Rosa's relationship" (108). Their relationship is not like the one between Leon and Luciano, which is based on Leon's one-sided courtship of Luciano and ends up in betrayal and tragedy. Mah and Rosa teach things to each other, and Mah disregards Rosa's ethnicity, unlike the other Chinese women in the sweatshop. These episodes again reveal Mah as other, or rather other sides of her, including personal desires and an individual life, one not exclusively devoted to her family.

Beyond what Leila can access about Mah when she views her behind the cultural mask of the racial Mother is the independence of her mother's own feelings. Right after the memory of the family dinner tempts Leila to stay in Chinatown, she remembers something else:

> When Mah and Leon were first married, I was always surprised when he came home from his voyages. I expected him to change at sea; I think I even

> expected him to come back as my father. But it was always Leon Leong, in his starched whites, his burnt-sugar tan, his S.S. *Independent* laundry sack full of presents.
>
> I finally saw what Mason had been saying all along: Mah loved Leon. (190)

Young Leila expects stepfather Leon to be her biological father. She tries to assimilate alterity, represented as the stepfather, with the biological unity of the mother and the daughter, the family. On the other hand, Leila looks forward to Leon's return as a stranger, which is symbolized as the "laundry sack full of presents," a bag full of the unexpected. She imposes this ideal father on Leon in the hope of making her family look more traditional while simultaneously expecting unchanged alterity in him and lets him be as he is. His unpredictability is also represented in the considerable pages of the novel spent on Leila's search for Leon in Chinatown and her attempt to take him home. Leila usually fails to find him, who slips away from Leila's intention to catch him and turn him into an ideal father who comes home and does fatherly things.

Then, what if Leila sees Mah in relation to this unpredictable Leon? As she remembers their relationship, Leila no longer sees Mah in her imaginary Chinatown where only she and Mah exist. Mah is now represented as a woman who loves a man who is always a stranger to Leila. If Mah has a relationship with an other who always remains other, Mah

may also be the other that Leila never fully understands. The scene above is a moment when Leila rediscovers Mah's desire to stay with and wait for Leon in Chinatown. It is also a moment when she understands Mah in other terms than the mask of racial Mother or the victim who sacrifices herself for her husband and children. Mah stays in Chinatown as a result of her own desire and her choice to love Leon. Leon's otherness makes Leila realize there is a possibility that Mah is also an "other" with her own desire. Leon also plays an important role in demystifying the idealized maternal figure. The scene portrays Leon as a giver, a role often assigned to maternal figures, but here represented by a paternal figure. Father as giver is also depicted when Leon buys Leila a suede shoulder bag as a souvenir (183). If "maternal" sounds too feminine for a male figure, it may be said that he is represented not as a typical paternal character who takes away something from children or restricts them with his law. Through her memories of Leon and Mah, Leila finds an opening behind the cultural images of Chinese immigrants and finally recognizes that Mah loves Leon.[15]

After Leila discovers Mah's own desire, she no longer has to read self-sacrifice in her mother's every action. After Leila describes Mah's affair with Tommie Hom and the collapse of the family, the anti-plots of racial Mother's model minority story, there is a scene in which Mah gives Leila and Mason a box of dim sum. Leila unconsciously applies the cultural lens of the self-sacrificing mother and the filial duty in the meaty bones (28-30), but here, right

before “Leon’s welcome-home dinner,” she does not read any cultural meaning into the gift:

> Just before noon, Mah came home from Duckie’s Mom’s smelling like the perfume section of Woolworth’s. Mason and I were still having coffee.
>
> “Nice perm, Mrs. Leong … You look like Miss Chinatown.”
>
> Mah laughed. “Bad boy! Talk pretty!” She put a pink box on the table. “Here, eat some dim sum.” (186)

In her description of Mah with her hair dressed and smelling of perfume, Leila portrays Mah as a woman with her own self-awareness and enjoyment, which makes her an ambivalent figure that cannot easily be reduced to the fixed image of racial Mother or Asian American woman exploited by a market economy that seeks cheaper labor without complaints. Mah’s body is also no longer reduced to a womb and breasts for her children. It exists for her own desire to remain in Chinatown await for Leon’s return home. As Leila recognizes Mah’s subjectivity, an imaginary umbilical cord of her guilt between Mah and Leila is cut loose, and Mah transforms from the abbreviated personhood of racial Mother to a whole character one who illuminates the complex portrait of a Chinese immigrant woman.

Tactics of “Backdaire”

While Leila resolves her personal struggle with Mah and is getting ready to leave Chinatown, a question remains: what formed the relationship between Leila and her parents,

and what does it mean for Leila to be a Chinese American woman? The question would be more urgent outside Chinatown. After she rediscovers Mah's own choice and desire to stay with Leon, her portrayal of Chinatown can also be rediscovered and changed, and she has to re-describe herself. If she ceases to see Chinatown in a biased way, she must also demystify the dichotomy separating Chinatown from the outside. The reconfiguration of Chinatown can initiate a revision of herself, just as she now recognizes her mother's subjectivity. How does she narrate herself and avoid Kafka's logic of the "syncresis" of Asian and American, which would place her in the impossible position of absolute neutrality?

As she comes and goes between Mah, Mason and Leon, Leila often finds herself in conflicting situations. She also works as an intermediate between school and parents, and she is often in a dilemma because she can understand the immigrant parents' way while teaching them American parenting. Like other heroines of Chinese American novels, she functions as a translator for the parents, and she is fed up with the responsibility. She attributes Ona's suicide to her being stuck in between as a second daughter, but Leila herself is stuck in between. Leila's most distinctive "in-betweeness" is her identity as a Chinese American woman, but who is a Chinese American woman? Many Asian American novels tackle the issue of the so-called in-between identity, but in what ways does Leila (re)define being a Chinese in America?

While eating with Nina in a restaurant outside New York Chinatown, Leila is spoken

to by a Spanish waiter who seems interested in Nina. "'You two Chinese?' he asked. 'No.' I let my irritation fill the word. 'We're two sisters'" (34). During this lunch, Leila decides to marry Mason in New York so that she can avoid a banquet that she feels obliged to hold for Mah, who is always invited to wedding ceremonies but never invites others. This lunch with Nina inspires her to leave Chinatown and fulfill her own desires. As I argue above, the departure from Chinatown may free her spiritually from Chinatown's codes of the filial duty. Thus, her "irritation" could be read as her annoyance with those who try to bind her to Chinatown due to her race. As an answer to the Spanish waiter's question, she says, "We're two sisters." If the answer is her objection to those who recognize her only by her race, how should it be interpreted?

Leila's "Sister" comment anticipates an idea that Yoonmee Chang introduces to describe a political sisterhood that is not based on biological ethnicity, like the one between Mah and Rosa. Leila and Nina are, in the eyes of the Spanish waiter, definitely Asian, whether they speak in English or Chinese, but Leila denies her Chineseness. Moreover, in a strict sense, they are not full biological sisters, which she also denies. In both cases, she refuses to acknowledge the biologically given facets of her identity. Of course, her denial does not change anything in reality; the waiter would still think they are Asians, and she has difficulty explaining why she and Ona have different family names when she is interrogated by a police officer. I would like to consider her denial, however, as a sign of her choice to

look for an alternative way of addressing herself. Leila seeks to re-describe her own identity beyond race, using a discourse that does not totally depend on biological, universal facts, but rather on a personal, individual account.

Here again, Phillipa Kafka's idea of "syncretism" presents a potentially ideal solution to Leila's struggle to gain a regenerated identity. Kafka considers "syncretism" to be a union of the old and the new, Chineseness and Americanness or East and West in general. She also finds "syncretism" in Leila's efforts to re-describe herself, according to a kind of idealization of in-betweeness as a transcendent identity, an identity beyond racial opposition (Kafka 52). Furthermore, quoting Elaine Kim, Kafka argues that syncresis registers a need for balance between two emphases, and considers the novel as "Ng's effort to syncretize East and West in order to achieve balance" (53). "Balance," Kim's wording, is problematic because it means that the two emphases are something stable on which one can stand to maintain an impossible impartiality, so stable, in fact, that they relate eternal truths about Chineseness and Americanness.

In her attempt to try to resolve the dichotomies, Kafka's reading may actually preserve them. If, following Kafka's argument that Asian American women must not forget the past, Nina would be condemned as the wrong model for Asian American women, that very judgment means there must be a correct model. Diane LeBlanc argues that Kafka's classification of Nina as an ungrateful postfeminist "creates the binary

feminist/postfeminist.... Predicating Leila's self-affirmation on a feminist/postfeminist binary creates opposition between sisters … that one woman's self affirmation depends on her negation of another" (19). According to Kafka, feminism and postfeminism are fixed discourses, and one must reject one to choose the other. This not only limits the frame of feminism, as LeBlanc says, but also threatens to limit the possible range of representations of Asian American women figures because Kafka's list of binaries includes the West/East binary. Basing her solution on the negation of another keeps the structure of the binary alive.

Instead of Kafka's problematic idea of "syncresis," LeBlanc proposes an approach that leverages the many sites of confused, and therefore tentative, identity in the narrative. She writes, "As an alternative to syncresis, the conclusion may suggest the inevitability of ambiguity. Ng's use of the bicultural neologism "backdaire [back there]," mimicking the "updaire [up there]" sign in Salmon Alley, suggests her awareness that although Leila may accept difference by facing dualism, living with it still poses obstacles within the mundane and the spiritual" (19-20). Leila *may* accept difference, but it does not mean that the difference is resolved. It means "living with it" (18). The word "backdaire" keeps Leila's problem open because "Ng's creation of language that simultaneously rejects the dominant discourse and threatens to impede Leila's access to power through that discourse acknowledges the material reality of living with difference" (LeBlanc 13). The word does not close the question of her identity but maintains it as an open space in the process of

negotiating her ongoing reality. The word acknowledges Leila as an agent in touch with reality, not in the fantasy of syncretism. In contrast to Kafka's argument, which suggests that Leila's problematic life ends as the novel ends with the one-time solution, Leila's tactic is not an easy choice. LeBlanc warns, "Leila's quest ends in self-affirmation that is only momentary" (21), and that Leila's tactic is not a one-time survival means of syncretizing the differences. Leila's more sustainable way to deal with difference is to live with it and to negotiate with it because the difference itself changes and transforms.

Further analysis of the word "backdaire" will serve to illuminate Leila's strategy for negotiating her identity. The paragraph in which the word appears reads, "I was reassured. I knew what I held in my heart would guide me. So I wasn't worried when I turned that corner, leaving the old blue sign, Salmon Alley, Mah and Leon–everything–backdaire" (191). Although Leila says she leaves everything, the components of the word, English and Chinese-accented English, are what she uses and is exposed to in her life. The word itself situates Leila between Chinatown and the outside, and prohibits her from occupying only one side. Using such a "mongrel" word symbolizes Leila's position, one that is hard to settle in one place. This does not mean that Leila is free from her Chinese heritage and therefore able to manipulate Chineseness and Americanness accordingly. Her Chineseness is not something that is manageable, but rather it is represented as some kind of a natural force that guides her life. When she becomes aware of Mah's love for Leon, she also notices that the past is an

essential part of her identity and a force that keeps her alive. She says, “I believe that the secrets we hold in our hearts are our anchors, that even the unspoken between us is a measure of our every promise to the living and to the dead. And all our promises, like all our hopes, move us through life with the power of an ocean liner pushing through the sea” (190). She no longer considers her Chinatown experience and Chinese American identity as burdens that impede her access to power. Now they form the “promise,” or a connection that links her with reality and history (“to the living and to the dead”). This is not a simple return to the biological facts that define her and bind her to cultural meanings associated with Chinese identity. Instead, she discovers her past to be a cultural construct that enables her to access reality and history, from which mother-daughter relationships and Asian identity have been traditionally expelled so that they could be both marginalized and idealized. Leila chooses her subject to be historicized, to be in touch with reality and history so that she may bring her own daughter subject in relation to Mah outside of the historically devoid space of Chinatown. She comes to the conclusion using the metaphor of ship, a symbol of Leon, as if in recognition of Mah’s love for Leon.

Leila’s use of the neologism “backdaire” underlines that she recognizes herself as an agent formed in reality as an ever-changing cultural, political construct. From the 1960s to the 1990s, the approximate time setting of the novel, China saw tremendous changes that heavily influenced American views of China and Chinese American societies. Leila herself

says that the historical facts of old China that represent the typical mystic images of China are something the sisters regard as past stories, to which they could no longer relate:

> We're lucky, not like the bondmaids growing up in service, or the newborn daughters whose mouths were stuffed with ashes. The beardless, soft-shouldered eunuchs, the courtesans with the three-inch feet and the frightened child brides – they're all stories to us. Nina, Ona and I, we're the lucky generation. Mah and Leon forced themselves to live through the humiliation in this country so that we could have it better. We know so little of the old country. We repeat the names of grandfathers and uncles, but they have always been strangers to us. Family exists only because somebody has a story, and knowing the story connects us to a history. (33)

Old China's historical facts are stories, which nonetheless contribute to their identity as Chinese American. The paragraph above begins with China's history, but in family discourse, it changes into a personal story that "connects us to a history." A story is always a history and vice versa. What torments the family is not the curse of Leon's paper father's homeless bone, a story that fails to explain the family's struggle, but the discriminatory society that keeps the family in poverty. By showing that a story is a history, it is possible to say that the text tries to reveal that a history is not a fixed discourse about an ethnic minority.

The novel tries to establish history as a story through the representation of bones,

which are usually seen as a firm essence associated with Chinese Americans' biological and ethnic identity as immutable facts. By contrast, bones take on various meanings that evade fixation and definition, much like the unknown reason for Ona's suicide. The bone first appears as a metaphor of Chinatown gossip ("Here's another bone for the gossipmongers" (1)), but it turns into the original curse on the family, a bitter memory of the sisters' childhood, Chinese children's paternal heritage, and the term Mah's uses when she sews. The changing meanings of bones imply that fixity in the novel is impossible, but the changes are so subtle that they sometimes go unnoticed, just like Grandpa Leong's bone that is moved to another place without anyone in the family noticing.

This "unfixity" is also shown in Leila's ability to see things from two perspectives. When she visits a student's home, she has compassion for their poverty, since she experienced it before, yet she can manage to be stern and do things in an American way (14-15). This does not mean that she is a neutral or fair person who can see things in an impartial way, or that she manipulates the two perspectives to gain power. She chooses one way over another according to the situation, and she chooses to deal in an American way with the immigrant parents who want her to do things in a Chinese way. Choice is always situational and negotiable. Leila is not free from cultural restraints; she must choose to be an American or a Chinese person due to the fact that others recognize her in one or the other way. Cultural and historical restraints bind her identity, but they also enable her to become

decision-making agent. The mobility of her perspective enables her to access her Chinese American woman's reality rather than the fantasy based on fixed representations of Chinese American women. Her identity, no longer a burden, is an essential tool for her survival.

Addressing Yourself

As she reconfigures the relationship among Chinatown, Mah, and herself, Leila's relationship with Mah also transforms. Despite her longstanding assumption that Mah needs her, Leila's decision to leave Chinatown is supported by Mah. When Leila first tells Mah about moving out of Chinatown, Mah supports it while offering her the opportunity to return home:

> … "Mah," I said, looking up, "I'm going to move to the Mission with Mason."
>
> … She looked me in the mirror. It was quiet for a long time. I thought, I do look like her. The shape of the face, the single fold above the eye, the smallish round mouth. I wonder, Will I be like her? Will I marry like her? …
>
> "No Chinese there, you know," she said …
>
> "Why not get married?" she asked. She still wouldn't look at me.
>
> "I'll see how it goes," I said. For a minute I expected the worst, that she'd slap me, hit me with a hanger, call me names.

"Give it a test." She nodded, and then muttered, almost to herself,

"Remember to have a way out." (187-88)

In this scene, Leila helps Mah choose a dress for Leon's coming home dinner. While watching Mah select a special dress for Leon, Leila recognizes that Mah actually cares for Leon, a sentiment of which Leila is always not certain. Because Leila is not assured that Mah is truly happy with Leon, she has hesitated to leave her in Chinatown alone with him. This scene thus anticipates the dinner scene at the end and Leila's assurance that Mah's loves Leon.

The dress selection scene also resembles the dinner scene in that Leila is tempted to identify herself with Mah. The intimacy created by the mirrored images of mother and daughter could be read in as similar to the way in which a Joy Luck mother realizes how she and the daughter are culturally separated even though they look alike in the mirror (Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* 304). Despite having decided to lead a separate life from her mother, the intimacy of the facial similarities represents another temptation to remain in the imaginary maternal space and escape the fear of a possible failed marriage. Although Leila initially associates their facial similarities with their destinies, she eventually interrupts the association at the end of the scene, declaring that she is moving out of Chinatown. When she worries that Mah might slap her in the face, she is surprised by her mother's agreement with the idea of living with Mason.

Since Leila disentangles Mah from the gloomy image of Chinatown, leaving Chinatown does not necessarily mean rejecting Mah, and in fact, the way back to her mother is offered by Mah. Mah's unexpected offer not only reveals the distinction between Leila and Mah but it also signals that Leila may/will lead a different life from Mah's. Having "a way out" is advice that Mah learns from her experience as well as her recognition of the new generation's acceptance of cohabitation before marriage. With Mah's offer, Leila can leave Chinatown and still maintain a way back home. Mah does not clearly say that Leila can return to her in Chinatown. Rather she considers Leila's leaving as "a test," which implies that if the result is not good, Leila may come back to her Salmon Alley home. When Mah is abandoned by her first husband, she has nowhere to turn to until Tommie Hom hires her. I consider the "way out" to be Mah's offer of a "return address" in Chinatown. Leila does not need to abandon Mah even though she leaves her. In traditional plots of mother-daughter relationships, the daughter must always choose one over the other. If she chooses a man, she has to leave the mother, as in Grimm's "Ashypet (Cinderella)" or "Snow-White," which justifies matricide and offers a woman a life with a man as the appropriate and only choice. If she chooses the mother, she is doomed to lead a gloomy life with the mother, like Laura Wingfield in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*. Instead, *Bone* proposes another solution for the mother-daughter separation that does not depend solely on the daughter's decision. Leila's dilemma is resolved by Mah's letting her go and offering her a return

address. Chinatown is no longer an imaginary maternal space that forces the daughter to relinquish her autonomy in exchange for a peaceful, but regressive mother-daughter symbiosis. Now, it is where the two can recognize each other's independence. Mah, by offering Leila a way back to her, sets her free from the cultural restraint of Chinese filial duties.

An alternative story of mother-daughter relationships is further elaborated in Leila's word "backdaire" (191). It is a word that reflects Leila herself, who leaves Mah while she keeps a way *back* to her. Thanks to Mah's offer, Leila does not have to fix herself in one place with Mason. The word that has English and Chinese-accented English in itself marks her decision not to remain on one side. It signifies a certain direction behind Leila, but, at the same time, with the ongoing cultural negotiation within the word, it also recalls the reason that Leila leaves. She leaves behind her parents and memories, personal things, but they still form her identity as a cultural construct; "backdaire" is a mixture of story and history, personal and political. The word continues to problematize and politicize what Leila leaves behind. Just as Leila continues contemplating possible reasons for Ona's suicide by repeatedly asking why, the word that contains alterity within it and never settles in English persists in interrogating what a Chinese American woman's experience is, leaving the problems open to examination and re-imagination. There may be another way to exoticize and fix Leila's story in a certain cultural frame. Like the misspelled doorplate "updaire [up

there],” which was repainted by someone and which remains for a long time, the word inscribes Leila’s story with persistent ambiguity. Leila’s tactic is to resist resolving the problem so that future oversimplifications of identity and cultural perspective remain in tension. It is not to put an end to her Chinatown experience, but to leave it open, to “have a way out” from the nexus of images that would confine her within a narrative about Chinese American woman’s experience that she did not authorize. “Backdaire” is Leila’s strategic way of addressing herself, her experience, stories, and histories.

Through the novel, Leila tries to disentangle Mah from Chinatown by discovering gaps between Mah and the racial Mother so that she can free herself from the cultural ties to Chinese American women’s filial duty. Maternalized Chinatown repeatedly tries to confine her inside with its tempting fantasy of a selfless life with Mah. She traces back her family history and tries to see how different her own story is from the history, the mainstream discourse of Chinese Americans. Finally, she realizes that reality, which consists of the family’s past, is the way to keep Mah and herself alive. This is not an ethnocentric return to biological identity, but rather signals a way in which one may recognize herself apart from the predominant ethnic discourse and thereby extricate herself from a fixed representation according to her ethnicity. Leila’s temporary answer is to keep open the question of the racial minority’s experience, expressed in the word “backdaire,” by asking what she leaves behind, what has made herself, and what promises she made with her past.

Chapter 5: The Correlation Between Sexuality and Race in Mei Ng's *Eating Chinese Food Naked*

Mei Ng's *Eating Chinese Food Naked* (1998) is a story that takes place during the summer when 22-year old Ruby Lee reluctantly returns to her estranged parents' home in Queens after graduating from Columbia University with a degree in women studies. She works as a temp to buy tickets to Florida because she is obsessed with a plan to rescue her mother, Bell, from a tyrant husband, Franklin, and take her to Florida. She has a Jewish boyfriend, Nick, but is sexually active with other men and even fantasizes about sex with women. Eventually, she leaves home to live in a studio apartment at a women's hotel in Manhattan and breaks up with Nick. The novel ends with Bell's message on an answering machine that recounts a Chinese recipe she asked about before. Despite the seductive title and bold sexual description, the novel deals with Asian American novels' traditional themes of the protagonists' anxiety of assimilation. Ng revealed in her interview that Kingston is one of her "heroines of the craft," along with Toni Morrison and Carson McCullers; thus, featuring sexuality could reflect her intention to differentiate herself from traditional Chinese American women's writings (Interview). Ng also uses frequent motifs from Asian American novels, such as family histories about the arranged marriage between a hard-working husband and a picture bride (a bride who marries a man she never met before except through photograph),

the sweatshop where the mother works, the family laundry business, the heroine's life in and out of the parents' home/Chinatown and the intimate mother-daughter relationship. However, she twists these by presenting a sexually active young daughter, who is navigating her transition from heterosexual to queer. I use the term "queer" because even though she breaks up with her boyfriend and recognizes her lesbian desire later, it is unclear if she will have relationships or sex exclusively with women or men.

The sexuality, or simply the description of sex, did not initially evoke much controversy; critics often considered it to be just a tool to be edgy and to sell books. In fact, although there are a handful of reviews, the novel apparently did not sell well, and, as Wenying Xu laments, scholarly articles on the novel are scarce compared to the numerous papers on Kingston's and Tan's texts (Xu 159). The main reason is likely that sex as a literary motif had already become commonplace by the publishing year of 1998. College graduates facing the harsh reality of finding their path (mostly a job), that is, still in limbo before fully maturing or undertaking a formal career, are also a familiar theme of Generation X, which is exemplified in the movie *Reality Bites* (1994). In short, the topics of the novel were not terribly novel in the eyes of American readers. Considering the traditional motifs in Chinese American women's texts, however, the twist of sexuality represented by a queer daughter challenges the typical understanding of Chinese woman subjects, who are conventionally depicted as highly sexually charged, mysterious femmes fatales, "dragon ladies" in

mainstream representations. Introducing a “sexy” Chinese American girl risks reinforcing the hyper-sexualized image of Asian women. Some reviews showed indifference to Ruby’s survival story as a queer Chinese American woman in America, as if she is just experimenting in an early phase of her life, which is a discourse often used to marginalize sexual minorities’ experience. One of the reviewers, apparently a white woman, even remarks that she does not really care about what happens to Ruby in the end. They seem to avoid sensing what is actually behind Ng’s monotonous omniscient narrative, a strategy that evokes detachedness to the story. When reviewers say they do not really care about the heroine, they symbolically silence her, rendering her invisible to them. If she is in a minority, their indifference further marginalizes the group.

Ruby’s survival strategy is closely linked with the literary form of buildungsroman, which is still utilized in many narratives. While buildungsroman in general aims for the protagonist’s maturity, its use in Asian American novels can be problematic because if the goal of ensuring the protagonist’s maturity or of creating order out of chaos means a unified subject of Asian American, it requires that there be a model of Asian American whose Asianness and Americanness are perfectly proportionate. The abrupt ending of Ng’s novel seems to avoid giving a specific answer to Ruby’s self-discovery journey. It obviously rejects the predictable ending of maturity and revelation, as she confirms in an interview: “I don’t like a happy Hollywood ending. I’m more interested in that sick world, that twisted-up stuff

that's underneath family relations" (Interview). The ending is indefinite, subtle, and tentative, just like her burgeoning queerness. It is an answer in the form of refusal to answer the recurring question of what it means to be a Chinese American because it is not easy to answer this cruel, racial question that is unfairly imposed on the ethnic minority. Mei Ng herself answered the question, saying, "I didn't quite know what it meant to be Chinese and American…. I'm still trying to figure it out" (Interview). What does it mean for a Chinese American girl from Queens to listen to her mother's recipe in a Manhattan apartment?

The ambiguity of the suggestive title itself provides another lens into the tensions animating the narrative. One of the reasons for the reviewers' indifference is the provocative, attention-seeking title, but few interrogate what it really means. Who eats and who is naked? On one version of the novel's cover are chopsticks and a bamboo steamer, from which apparently female legs and a hand seductively stick out, suggesting that the Asian body is a food. It seems to ask readers if they would read/eat/consume an Asian woman as their exotic, sexual entertainment. If one is not of Chinese descent, eating Chinese food right after sex (which is implied by "naked") has no certain meaning. However, for Ruby, practicing ethnic foodways has a cultural meaning to it, especially in regard to having it after sex, at once a private moment and a topic forbidden in her family. Some reviewers think the title refers to a specific scene in the novel, while others do not care in the first place. In the novel, Ruby actually wears a silk robe when having Chinese takeaway after sex with Nick, who is instead

naked (233). In addition, Ng deliberately avoids using the word, Chinese, to describe the food. If it is not Ruby who is naked and eating Chinese food, what does the title really mean? As Xu points out, the title implies there is "vulnerability and anxiety in practicing ethnic foodways" (147); indeed, some would notice the tension in the title right away upon reading the title and the author's name. As Silvia Schultermendl observes, "[t]o be able to assume home within the Asian American community often requires not coming out" (113), and, in Ruby's case, even heterosexuality is treated carefully in her parents' house. Eating Chinese food after sex is not something Ruby can comfortably do. The title represents the nexus of Ruby's anxiety about her Chinese American identity and her sexuality.

The juxtaposition of ethnic foodways and sexuality is a dangerous liaison that could challenge Ruby's ethnic consciousness and sexual orientation. Some argue that her incestuous desire for her mother is just her misinterpretation of love, as if the perverse desire does not matter, while others claim that it is queerness, which may obscure her desire (although the intent of such critiques is not to locate her desire in the dichotomous frame of hetero/homo). In this reading, however, her sexual desire does indeed matter because, for Ruby, sex is a significant part of her communication that lingers on until the end when she listens to Bell's message. Does the message imply Ruby's unresolved desire or her departure from her mother, or her new relationship with her mother? This chapterwill trace how her sexuality and desire interact with her racial consciousness, resulting in a survival narrative about how Ruby

becomes able to express her sexual desires as well as her personal and political sense of selfhood. First, I will consider several reviews to establish the range of typical readings the novel receives. Although reviews are often for commercial purposes, they also show important, interesting themes or motifs, just as they do in academic essays. They introduce cultural attitudes toward various narratives, which often reflect social viewpoints so that readers can choose books wisely. Then I will introduce two academic analyses to explore how they treat these matters in order to track the path that Ruby's desire takes and explain how she evolves into a fully desiring or eating subject, as the title implies.

Are Race and Sex Too Classic?

Some reviewers focus only on the novel's sexual tension, as seen in Jackie Wullschläger's review for the *Financial Times*, in which she writes, "Mei Ng's *Eating Chinese Food Naked* jacket, shiny legs sticking out of a bamboo steamer, accompanied by a pair of phallic chopsticks is about the brash and sensual world of a Chinese-American girl" ("Prose Full of Promise"). One might wonder whether she actually read the novel since she literally mentions only the jacket. Some reviewers notice Ruby's overt racial consciousness, but they usually minimize its significance. Susan Sachs for the *New York Times* writes, "Mei Ng, who grew up in Queens, explores the classic literary theme of estrangement between immigrant parents and their children," and notices that "[l]ike other writers of her generation

—she is 33—she also expands it to take in feelings of ethnic and racial alienation" ("American Dream, No Illusions"). She generally thinks that the theme of the novel is not so interesting. Gina Vivinetto for the *Tampa Bay Times* praises the novel and says that Ruby is "a thoroughly modern Holly Golightly," who is the "poster child for the World's Most Ambivalent Youth" ("First Time Out Series"). She nonetheless argues that Ruby *can* justify her frequent cheating on her boyfriend because he does not know how to eat with others in the Chinese manner, in which one shows affection by sharing the best or meatiest parts of food with one's partner. She also remarks that what really bothers Ruby is her lesbian desire. Vivinetto implies that Ruby's fixation on foodways is ultimately an excuse to avoid facing her attraction to women. Her indifference to Ruby's cultural fixation is obvious when she says that Ruby's memory of being bullied in school for being a Chinese American is just "the Chinese flavor," which plays a trivial role in the novel's "universal themes of family struggle and coming of age" ("First Time Out Series"). But is it the same as Anne who is teased for her red hair, merely a typical incident that can happen in any schoolyard?

Carole Morin, in her review for *The Scotsman*, also argues that the title is just a lure to sell copy: "Great Title, except she is not naked." Morin thinks that Ruby is "anaesthetized" and that her narrative is like being "coached in a writing school," implying she is hiding something from the readers ("Stir Fried Recipe to Feed the Soul"). She contends that Ruby confuses "her sexuality and feelings for her family" and "desires to fill the great spiritual

emptiness with food" as if to say that the two things could be considered separately ("Stir Fried Reipe"). However, Morin points out the important motif of food as hunger and comments that "[t]his device is reminiscent of Banana Yoshimoto's best-selling Japanese novel, *Kitchen*, but more appropriate in the United States where no-one can ever have enough" ("Stir Fried Recipe"). Is Ruby's longing for physical contact really a product of materialism? For Morin, not only is the novel full of the "'who am I?' lament," but that lament is only about the dysfunctional family, typical worries of those in their twenties and lesbians, and does not include any thoughts as an ethnic minority. Ruby's criticism of white people's use of perfume is thus merely "perceptive charm." Like Vivinetto, Morin argues that Ruby uses her ambiguous attitude toward her Chinese identity to ditch her Jewish boyfriend, saying she "is both ashamed of her heritage and feels superior about it. Jewish Nick does not have a chance, even before admitting that most of the time 'I don't even notice your Chineseness'," and determines that "it isn't really China that this woman is stigmatised by, it is the burden of being working-class in America. Her parents are proud underdogs with chopsticks. Their favorite daughter can pass for middle class and feels guilty" ("Stir Fried Recipe"). Not only is it racist to put "chopsticks" on anything Asian, but Morin swiftly denies that Ruby's Chinese heritage has anything to do with her problems. In addition to this, it is not clear whether Ruby's parents are proud of their jobs. Franklin is definitely a hard-working man, but that does not mean he is proud of his laundry business, considering his ethnic identity and the

actual jobs available to him when he started the business. Not better off is Bell, who thought she married a rich man who had bought her a melon in China, which was worth so many chickens.

Some reviewers unavoidably compare Ng with her predecessors. Heller McAlpin, in her review for *the Los Angeles Times*, says that although the Chinese American cultural milieu seems less exotic and shocking after Kingston's "brilliant, fierce nonfiction book" and Tan's, which "further explored and popularized" it, "there is still plenty of room left for writers such as Mei Ng" ("Dirty Laundry"). Her remarks are not entirely favorable, for example, in her finding that Mei Ng's novel is "less striking" than Kingston's and Tan's because "[w]hile direct and clear, Ng's writing is less visceral, lively and poetic than Kingston's and less layered and rich than Tan's. Instead, there's an overall edginess and a graphic boldness to this first novel that is distinctly 1990s. In addition, it feels at times as if Ng is wary of being too engaging" ("Dirty Laundry"). Again, Kingston's rather experimental writing and Tan's exotic description of China are considered to be models of Chinese American literary texts, which should be poetic and include some mysteries to be revealed, as if there is always something hidden from American readers. While McAlpin notices Ruby's anxious narrative ("Ng is wary of being too engaging"), she does not further probe the cause of the anxiety, concluding it occurs because "Ruby is at a crossroads, as uncertain about her future with her sweet Jewish boyfriend Nick … as she is about her career." She observes that

"[t]here is tenderness in Ng's book, but it is hidden under a layer of toughness," and connects this covertness with her repressed lesbian desire. However, she apparently thinks Ruby's closet problem is the same as that of other white women. She also notices that Ng uses food and laundry to "underscore cultural differences between Chinese and Americans and as extended metaphors for love" and says that Ruby "confuses self-sacrifice with love" and "tries our patience with her unfairness to Nick and her obsession with dirty laundry. Using the cultural differences in their eating habits to brand as selfish this patient, princely man—who buys a token just to wait on the subway platform with her, helps paint her mother's kitchen and puts up with countless infidelities—just doesn't wash" ("Dirty Laundry"). McAlpin seems so annoyed with Ruby's infidelity that she considers Ruby to be some kind of a criminal: "[W]e are not convinced that this is a person who will ever truly come clean with herself or others even after acknowledging her lesbianism. Worse, by the end of Ng's book, we don't really care." It is as if Ruby is not worth McAlpin's attention because she is not a sweet little Chinese girl, or like the other Chinese American heroines in Kingston's and Tan's novels, who either try to be cultural bridges or whose stories appeal to Western morality. Considering her introduction, which situates the novel in a brief history of Chinese American women writers, McAlpin's conclusion makes me wonder whether she would react to Ruby the same way if she were a white girl.

Katherine Forestier, in her review for the *South China Morning Post*, has similar

opinions, such as sex is no longer shocking and the mother-daughter relationship is more interesting. She states, “Eating a Chinese take-away, nude, turns out to be neither a culinary nor sexual climax, however saucy the publishers would like to portray the scene” (“Cold Sex Food for Thought”). Lynn Karpen in her review for the *New York Times*, on the other hand, notices that Ruby’s pattern of sex is based on her cultural upbringing, in which physical contact never occurred before marriage. She comments, “To Ruby, the act of eating Chinese food naked is both a routine final stage in her lovemaking and a metaphor for her belief that her parents can read her every thought” (Review). Similarly, May-Lee Chai in her review for the *San Francisco Chronicle* states, “Ruby cannot love anyone because, ultimately, she does not love herself. Her bitterness does not allow it”—though she does not specify whether the bitterness is about her ethnicity and upbringing (“Wit, Energetic Writing Flavor ‘Chinese Food’”). Sylvia Brownrigg, in her review for the *Guardian*, also notices the significant theme of the novel, saying, “the heart of this patchy, under-edited novel is the love between Ruby and Bell” (“Noodle Doodles”). She remarks, nonetheless, that even though Ruby’s ethnicity plays a role in the text, it is ultimately not the heart of the novel.

Overall, the reviewers are aware of Ruby’s ethnic, cultural background and (homo)sexuality, but are not eager to connect the two. For many Americans in the 1990s, the sexual experiments of straight people trying anything homosexual were no longer that scandalous or interesting as topics of literature. Considering how it is difficult for people

from ethnic minority groups to embrace a sexual identity that defies their cultural norms while maintaining their cultural belonging (Schultermandl 113-14), ethnicity and sexuality are not separate problems and remain difficult to negotiate. Whereas sexuality, whether it is fluid or not, is now considered part of one's identity, it is deeply influenced by one's cultural environment. Food in the novel is a useful signifier of Ruby's cultural environment, one that enables Ruby to contend with her Chinese heritage and sexuality. Although Silvia Schultermandl and Wenying Xu have made similar observations, this discussion will highlight the ways in which Ruby uses food to negotiate her incestuous desire for her mother. Does she resolve it or fail to do so? What is Ruby's idea of love? Ruby's quest for her identity is also a search for love and her own means of loving. If "What does it mean to be hyphenated American?" is a cruel question imposed on Chinese Americans, it could be restated as "How do you love yourself?" because self-esteem is the source of empowerment necessary for Ruby to survive, to find her place somewhere in America. How she copes with her lesbian desire and learns to love is not an immaterial issue, but indeed an urgent question to be asked as long as that question of ethnic identity lingers.

Food as Hunger

Food is an explicit motif of the novel, as it is mentioned in the title and throughout the narrative. But how does the representation of food evolve in the novel, and what does it

mean? Indicating that food is not merely a motif but a language for Ruby, Wenying Xu writes:

> Ng dramatizes the tensions between the ethnic, domestic space and the cosmopolitan space of streets, diners, and cafes – tensions that interlock motifs of food, ethnicity, and sexuality in this novel. The four-pronged language of food, ethnicity, space, and sexuality constructs Ruby's movement from a hetero with a subconscious desire for women to a queer consciousness that disobeys the either/or demand (127).

When she returns from Manhattan, Ruby's food life has to change from the city's fancy foods to home-cooked Chinese foods. The first scene of the novel is a dinner at the Lees' house/laundry, where the readers quickly learn that the family is dysfunctional. Bell is sick of hearing Franklin recounting all the horrible news of the day, and Ruby sits "so stiffly, as if afraid of her own family" (11). Bell insistently puts a "choice morsel" of white chicken meat in her daughter's bowl, saying, "More sweet near the bone," but she does not know that Ruby now prefers dark meat (11-12). Ruby also has now different ideas about showing her affection, saying, "Look at their bowls. Ruby's bowl is piled high with all the good bits, and there in her mother's bowl, a heap of bones. But now that she's grown, for once in her life she would like to push away the full bowl and eat from the other, the one her mother guards with both hands" (14). As Xu argues, "Bell's sacrifice moves as well as burdens Ruby, who wants

to express her love for her mother while maintaining independence" (149). After the dinner, Ruby remembers, "[s]he and her mother had always loved each other through sacrifice and worry" (14). Xu also observes that the dinner scene shows how "the Lees' ethnicity and class position structure their expressions of love and affection" (148). Their "worry" is not entirely out of parental and filial affection but also out of "economic disadvantage and vulnerability to racism and exploitation" (Xu 148).

Ruby and Bell try to find out whether each is still the same by talking about salty fish, a traditional homemade Chinese food. Bell wants to confirm that her daughter is still Chinese enough to love salty fish as she used to do, while Ruby tries to show her love for her mother by telling her that she still likes it. As Schultermendl argues, foodways in the novel are not used to show cultural solidarity and community belonging but to reveal that "the family's collective foodways are made up of contradictory food performances by the individual, encoded with different cultural understandings, which acknowledges the conflict between individual and group identity" (117). Ruby's preference for dark meat, Bell's misunderstanding of this, and the salty fish used to test each other's cultural consistency reveal how much they do not know each other even though they care for each other. Their foodways reveal their personal differences and their ways of behaving. Yet in Ruby's eye, her mother is a victim whom only she can rescue. She had tried to forget about the rescue, but it came back again and again as the "nagging feeling" while away from home (16).

Ruby had been dreaming of taking her mother away from her tyrant father since she was young. She remembers, “[w]hen Ruby was a kid, around the time when other little girls were being dandled on their daddy’s knee, touching the stubbles on his face and thinking about marrying him when they grew up, she was dreaming about marrying her mother and taking her away” (18). She remembers when “her mother would go out to the yard and water her garden. As she stood there with the hose in her hands, she would look past the neighbor’s fence. Ruby watched her night after night before she figured out the look on her mother’s face; it was a lonesome look” (18). The garden does not seem a space where Bell can take comfort because “[t]he soil in the backyard was poor, there wasn’t enough sun and squirrels picked the green tomatoes, took a few bites and left them on the ground. Ruby was six when she gathered the ruined tomatoes and decided it was up to her to look after her mother” (18). Those ruined tomatoes refer to Bell’s status: for Ruby, Franklin “had gone to China and had taken her mother away from everyone she knew and brought her to a strange country” (18). He has ruined a life that could have been something better, and now any possible happiness for Bell depends on Ruby.

Even now she is obsessed with the fantasy of the runaway marriage with her mother, which Morin calls “a twisted Freudian honeymoon.” Her fantasy then evolves into taking Bell to Florida where her friends live and always urge her to come and visit them. After the trip to Florida, Ruby and Bell would live together in an apartment in Manhattan, where the

two would enjoy having apple turnovers for dessert, not stewed prunes, mint jelly or pickled beets, which Bell buys just because they come in a nice jar (19). Bell's addiction to buying things in pretty packaging makes Ruby "sad as hell that her mother ate all those things she didn't even like" (19). Ruby's belief that Bell is a victim is reinforced when she finds out that Franklin in his seventies still frequently demands sex from Bell, which she does not enjoy very much. When disclosing her sex life with Franklin, Bell "spat the word [sex] from her mouth like a watermelon seed" (140). For Bell, who has never experienced orgasm, sex is an unwanted act, "a watermelon seed," in her life that she does only for her husband. This episode of her sex life signifies Mah's victimization in the household. Foods at home are often associated with Bell's victimization and confinement in her house, dissatisfaction with the miserable life that can be satisfying only in Ruby's fantasy. These foods (often ingredients) refer to hunger for something better, which is represented as a fancy pastry, apple turnovers, which also signal freedom in the city. In their connection to freedom and having multiple choices, these sweet foods are also often associated with sexual choices.

Food as Sexuality

Before she went to university, Ruby had already discovered that her family was different from others. Franklin and Bell do not touch each other like their neighbors, the Consaleses, who are "always kissing and hugging and grabbing each other…. They would go

after her like some tasty little roll, fresh from the oven, so good to eat" (51). Ruby compares herself to a "tasty" Western food that other family loves, implying that she identifies more readily with her American self, which can be loved just like others. Physical contact in her family is so deliberately avoided ("When her mother made her father tea, she wouldn't hand it to him but would place it beside him on the nightstand" (52)) that she learned neither how to touch people nor the different meanings of physical contact in different contexts. She says, "How hungry she was for that [people kissed hello and good-bye and put their arms around each other at school], to reach out and feel something solid against her" (52). Although "[a]t school, the first time Ruby left her room and went looking for someone to kiss, she blamed her family," her craving is finally realized in a lounge of the university's residence hall for freshmen, where boys on the sofa touched all over Ruby while she was sitting on the floor and watching TV. It never occurs to her that physical contact is something sexual because the only time her parents touched her was when she had a fever. Hence, she is surprised that, in the lounge, touching eventually leads to sex (52).

Now that she lives in her parents' house, sex is forbidden again, and she becomes restless. In order to deal with the frustration, she often leaves Queens for the city. These two places are again depicted by and contrasted with foods. While her home in Queens is associated with traditional Chinese foods such as boiled crab, which represents barbarian Chinese culture, the city is full of fancy confectionery which "suggests sexual freedom and

liberal choices" (Xu 152). When a man in a café talks to her for a possible hook-up, asking if she has ever had a mud pie, a dessert pie with lots of chocolate, she answers, "I'm a coconut-custard kind of girl" implying that she herself is a food for offer (116-17). Whereas foods are a mechanism for asserting herself while in the city ("I'm a coconut-custard kind of girl"), at home, foods are often used to fake her own thoughts, such as when she lies to Bell about the salty fish. Even telling her mother that she *had* a duck with berry sauce, an example of very Western cuisine, makes her feel guilty for leaving her mother, who used to *make* salty duck on a farm (13).

The association of eating and sexuality is most obvious when she acknowledges her lesbian desire. Because cooking became a bond between Ruby and Bell after Ruby helped her mother while she recovered from her "woman's operation," Ruby is obsessed with cooking (47). As if to reproduce the happy past, she tries to make the bread that her parents were proud of (Ruby's making of bread and her mother giving the slices to her co-workers obviously symbolize the family's process of assimilation), but somehow she fails. Ruby goes back to a basement that she moves into after feeling uncomfortable sleeping beside her mother, and she dreams of eating a roasted dog and having sex with her mother. In her dream, Bell stops before orgasm because Franklin wakes up (168). Then Ruby wakes up and the narrator flashes back to her childhood. After being asked by her classmates if she ate dog, Ruby asks her father if the allegation is true. He replies, "Yup, dogs are real delicacy. But you

don’t eat your own dog. You need your dog so you know if someone trying to come into your house. And you don’t eat your neighbor’s dog because that’s not too neighborly. But if you find a dog from another village, that dog you can eat” (168). Then she goes to a library, where she reads a book on tribal food rituals, which says that “[y]ou weren’t supposed to eat your own yams. Or your own dog. Or your own sister or mother” (169).

Dog eater has been long a derogatory term for Asians, especially Chinese, and incest is also a sexual taboo in modern Western society. Thus, as scholars point out, this dream is important as a nexus of race and sexuality. Xu writes, “[i]n her relationship with Bell, Ruby’s lesbian inclination finds a displaced but safe site for articulation” (152), and argues that Ruby’s incest desire is represented as unproblematic because Ruby dreamt of marrying her mother when she was young (153). It should be further notedthat Ruby’s dream shows how her lesbian desire is threatened and repressed by the patriarchal code of Franklin’s shadow (he is the one who tells her not to eat your own dog and who is responsible for interrupting Bell and Ruby’s sex) and the tribal law of women as objects for barter. Still, as Xu remarks about this Lévi-Straussian theory of foodways and sexuality, “Ruby learns through this food taboo that it is a social demand that she transfer her desire for her mother to other women” (153). Ruby’s dream associates not only food and sexuality but also food, sexuality, and race. In her dream, eating one’s own dog and having sex with one’s own mother are strangely intermingled and both “practices of exotic subcultures” are marked socially unacceptable

(Schultermendl 120). As Ruby's reaction to dogs as food implies ("She knew Chinese people ate pigeons, turtles and frogs, but dogs, no way" (168)), she prefers American foodways. When Ruby was thirteen and her family boiled crabs for a celebration, she could not stand the sight of crabs being torn apart by her parents and left the kitchen in the middle of the cooking to buy Sno-Caps, American chocolate candies, and eat them right away. This dream occurs right after Ruby fails to recreate her happier past of making bread, which indicates that the dream is also about her anxiety of assimilation. Baking bread symbolizes Western foodways and Ruby's attempt to be a "regular American girl" (25). She is uncertain whether she can fit into the world before her in terms of her ethnicity and sexuality. The dream and the tribal ritual tell her that, if you want to be like other Americans who do not eat dogs, you cannot have sexual intercourse with your own mother.

Still, it is unclear why Ruby is *sexually* attracted to her mother. Xu argues, "Ruby's love and desire for her mother are often described as conflicting with her need for freedom, for her mother is associated with the kitchen and the basement, a domestic space that makes Ruby restless" (153). Does Ruby love and desire her mother because Bell is a victim confined to her house? Franklin has discouraged his wife from going outside by recounting only the horrific news happening in the world every day and does not allow her to attend a language school because he fears losing her to other Chinese immigrant classmates. Is this, however, the only reason for Ruby to sexually desire her mother? Xu's arguments about Ruby's "love

and desire" focus on its situation and do not fully explain what it actually is. This line of interpretation may reflect Xu's adaptation of queer theories, which eschew a framework of hetero/homo dichotomy in the domain of sexuality because "authentic" sexuality, which is, for instance, established through coming out, just recreates a repressive system for those who are not categorized into newly created (or discovered) sexualities. When Xu says, "[f]luid sexual identities like bisexuality … disrupt the either/or rationality" (158), Xu's interpretation of queer theory's agenda is that it is empowering to avoid confining identity to the strictures of logical explanation. The difference between not explaining and not naming or classifying one's sexuality within two rigid categories is an ambiguous, thin line. Xu strategically focuses on situations and does not try to locate the origin of Ruby's desire in order to avoid the dichotomy of sexualities. Xu's argument is strategically correct, but I would still like to try to see what is behind Ruby's sexual desire.

Ruby's "love and desire" for Bell are obviously sexual, but when juxtaposed with foodways, the situation suddenly becomes confusing because sexuality, often considered to be a natural human quality, looks like foodways, which are obviously shaped by manmade cultural rules. Does Ruby desire her mother because she has lesbian inclinations, or has she mistaken her filial affection with sexual desire? It is also curious why eating and sex are treated the same way. Ruby was raised in a family where her parents showed their love through sharing food, rather than through physical contacts. Her idea of love and affection,

and her desire for them, have been constructed in a different way from those of other Americans or whoever feels confused by Ruby's sexual behaviors. The Lees show their affection through food sharing, though Ruby discovers that other people show their love through physical contact. This is how food and sexuality are intermingled in Ruby's identity and mode of communication. In the heterosexual world of her family, however, Ruby's desire has no room to be articulated. Moreover, in American society, Chinese foodways are stigmatized as barbarian culture. Thus, such ethnic foodways as eating dogs and such lesbian, incestuous desire as sex with her mother are connected and surface only in her dream.

Her desire is repressed under interlayered discourses of sex, race, and sexuality, and, perhaps as Xu implies, a traditional hetero/gay framework does not work here to understand the dynamic because multilayered repression likely means that her desire and sexuality are configured in a multilayerd way. For example, Ruby has a weakness for women, but she implies that it is because Bell repeatedly warns her to "[b]e careful of men, and boys too" because she thinks she herself married the wrong man, Franklin (53). The narrator says:

> If only she wouldn't fuck other people, they would be happy together, he [Nick] said to her again and again. And sometimes she tried not to, but sooner or later she felt compelled. She would meet someone and they would be talking, but as it got late, she'd start to feel far away, and slowly she'd move closer and closer until there she was, sitting in some man's lap.

> Or at least only fuck other women, Nick said; even that he could handle. She got mad when he said that, but it also made her feel sorry for him, that he didn't even know whom to be afraid of. Her affairs with men were harmless; she loved Nick as much as she could love any man, but she had a feeling that if she ever met a woman, she would leave him for good. (119-20)

She craves physical contact and enjoys sex with men so much that she even fantasizes about intentionally falling from stairs just to get nursed, to be touched on the face by her parents (83). What Ruby wants from women, however, is more than sexual satisfaction. She says, "[s]he felt like she was waiting. She looked at women and waited too long and missed her chance. Women were dangerous. Ruby knew a woman could break her heart just by looking at her. Men felt safer, maybe because her mother had warned her every day of her life about them, so she knew to keep a part of herself hidden away where they could never touch her" (87). In the heterosexual society and culture of America, Ruby fails to learn about women, her own gender and, in return, herself. That is why they have become "dangerous." To love women is, for Ruby, to love herself, but, after all, she "had no idea how to love" (159). Nick is sure about Ruby's love for him and thinks that all she has to do is stop fighting it, but Ruby says, "'But I don't know how,'…. Her heart felt like a little crumb heart that would never open" (159). Ruby cannot decide what she wants from Nick, but she cannot even open her heart and tell the truth to Nick in his room in Manhattan, the space of a lover, which should

provide choices about sexuality as well as freedom. In a passage relating a moment when she is on her way home to Queens, there is a description of a bottle of red wine, a very Western drink that belongs to the city. Although Nick has saved it for dinner, now he empties the bottle himself (159). The food in the city, which once symbolized sexual freedom and choices, now turns into the emptiness of Ruby's sexual and spiritual life. Unless she can face her desire, the city is another space of repression.

The force of heterosexual discourse is so strong that Ruby is tempted to go steady with Nick when she actually wants to "start all over again" by finding a stranger in the city for a one-night stand (115). She could see Nick, but she does not because it feels "dangerous to see him" when she lives in her parents' house (115). She also says that "she might be tempted to stay with him; days and weeks and then years would pass without her noticing, and one morning she'd wake up and look out the window and there, surrounding the house, would be the dreaded white picket fence" (115). A house and white picket fence are symbols of the American Dream and a goal of heterosexual couples, but they are "dreaded." The fence is not only a symbol of closeted sexuality, but also of the domestication of women that is, according to Schultermandl, reproduced through generations, a phenomenon she witnesses in her parents' house (Schltermandl 110). Schltermandl finds that "[t]he home in itself thus becomes a place where a person cannot be at home within his or her sexuality" (114). The fantasy of being at home is tempting, but ultimately a nightmare for Ruby because it cloisters

her lesbian desire and choices as a woman. Her home in Queens forbids sexuality in general, but heterosexual marriage outside Queens is also a closet. It is by no means a place for her to stay, nor can going steady with Nick be her plan. Just when she can finally imagine a future with Nick, she gets a "queer trapped feeling that wouldn't go away until she went out and fucked someone else, but even then, sometimes she felt even more trapped afterward" (87). Deeper than her sexual needs is her fear of heterosexuality, which miserably fails in her parents' marriage. Of course she knows other happy families, in which they show their love through kisses and hugs. Her fear of failed heterosexuality is also based on her family's ethnic poverty, which is also contrasted with life in the city. That is to say, she has to accept her lesbian desire and recognize her class and ethnic shame so that the separated worlds marked by different types of foods will be reunited, and she can feel comfortable in both spaces.

Ethnic and Class Shame

The daughter's internal conflict may effectively be masked by her adoption of mainstream behaviors. Of course, those behaviors that indicate her "normal" status as, for example, a student, are in direct conflict with cultural expectations about appropriate behavior for a young woman. As the narrative reveals, this ambivalence about herself is deeply intertwined with ambivalence about her mother's past and that of her family in general.

Ruby suffers two intermingled shames even though she acts like other students: she stays up late, gets drunk, and writes poems. Nevertheless, she feels uncomfortable talking about her mother's marriage story after disclosing to some friends that she was a picture bride because it made her self-conscious about her family's lower social status. She states, "Although she made friends, sometimes she looked at them and thought, Yes, you are my friend, but your parents have a house and sleep in the same bed and will send you to Europe in the summer and buy you a car for graduation, and yes, I am your friend, but I am your Chinese friend" (119). She had already learned when she was a child that not everybody lived behind their family business store (70). In the university, where people should have been more diverse, she still feels uneasy about her origin. Even though she changes her haircut, gets rid of all the clothes that would betray she was from Queens and makes the Dean's List "without seeming to study very much," she still fears someone might call her out for being from a lower class in Queens (119). Although her behaviors may appear to suggest that she is just ashamed of her class, as McAlpin implies, there is more at stake than that. Ruby also tries attending parties given by the Asian Student Union, but "they were Chinese in a way she didn't know how to be" (119). Because she was raised in Queens, where Chinese families were scarce, she is not Chinese enough when she finds herself among other Asian students. She is thus doubly excluded and ashamed.

That Ruby is ashamed of her class and ethnicity becomes acute when she refuses to

invite Nick to her laundry/house, then finally gives in and invites him. She had not invited him to her house not only because Franklin would be mean to him, but also because her house is a "house that wasn't even a house but four rooms behind a laundry" (25). When she finally decides to invite him, she remembers that her father was

> calm when he used a bag from the American supermarket, but when he used a bag from Chinatown, his face would get tight and his hands quick and angry as he turned the bag inside out so the Chinese lettering didn't show as much. "Why do you turn the Chinese bags inside out and not the American bags?" Ruby had asked him. "So people don't know this is Chinese garbage," he had said. (126)

His fear of being judged by his ethnicity stems from both racial and class shame because if he was in the upper class, he would not take out the garbage himself. Ruby "almost told him [Nick] about her father and the trash," but she changes the subject and that means, even in a close relationship, she is still uncomfortable about sharing her upbringing with others from the middle or upper classes (126). Nick is not obviously from a rich family, but his mother constantly visits him from Boston and does nothing but stay in his room for a week. When Nick visits Ruby's parents' home, he brings a bouquet, which "took up almost the entire counter. He [Nick] had chosen lilies and stocks and birds-of-paradise, not realizing they would be too showy for Ruby's mother's kitchen" (133). The contrast between the

overwhelming bouquet and the shabby kitchen point to a lack of a shared understanding about money, and his choice of flowers implies that he is actually indifferent to Ruby's family's social status. When Bell shows her hat to Nick, Bell says with "pride," "See the hat she [Ruby] got for me?" (133). Ruby buys the hat for Bell because she noticed that her mother got freckles on her face, and she also wants to look for something fitting for Florida weather. However, with her temporary employee earnings, she cannot afford a decent one. Ruby thinks that "[i]n the bright light of the kitchen, the hat looked flimsy" (133). Ruby

> took the hat from her mother and had to restrain herself from rolling it up and throwing it on the floor. It was a dumb hat, not at all what she had been looking for. "Why don't we throw this one away and I'll get you a better one?" Ruby said.
>
> Bell snatched up the hat and put it back on her head. "Don't you throw away my hat. This is my best hat."
>
> Nick touched the brim of the hat. "Ruby. The hat's fine."
>
> Ruby was close to tears. "Okay, okay. It's a good hat," she said, not believing it for a minute. (133)

It is just a hat, but for Ruby it suggests that her mother's satisfaction with such a cheap thing makes her cheap as well, and also symbolizes her failure to rescue Bell from poverty; Bell deserves a better hat and she fails to buy it for her. The hat represents Ruby's financial

powerlessness and failed love for Bell.

There is one thing Ruby is good at, cooking, which she learned from Bell when she was recovering from the operation. Even when she was a freshman, she covertly cooked in her room in the residence hall, which had no kitchen since burners were prohibited, and she fed anyone who was still up late at night (14). While she enjoys her college life, she is "haunted by a feeling of uneasiness," which is actually the guilt of leaving her mother. She copes with the feeling by cooking and giving foods to her friends. By becoming a mother-like figure herself, she can temporarily forget her mother. Once back home, she still uses cooking to deal with the uneasiness of living between Queens and Manhattan and of being ignorant about what she really needs. After taking a week to decide if she should continue the relationship with Nick, she makes cinnamon swirl bread with raisins. Making bread is associated with happy memories, such as dancing to the Bee Gees with her friend, Helen Hong, and the proud parents who joked about closing the laundry and opening a bakery and boasted to colleagues at the factory about having such a talented daughter by giving away slices of bread. The reproduction of the past by making bread almost works because "[w]hile the bread was baking, Franklin whistled around the house. Bell got out the mop and washed the kitchen floor. It had not been washed in some time…. Franklin had a cheerful news story for once," which makes everyone laugh (165). The buzz of the timer signals that this fleeting moment did not amount to the reconciliation it may have promised. "The two women

[Ruby and Bell] sobered up as if the bell had suddenly reminded them that the summer wouldn't last forever and that Ruby would move out someday" (166). The bread is ultimately a failure. Although the parents console her by saying, "No big deal," she knows it is a "big deal" (167). Something goes wrong and the bread fails to bake correctly because of a minor mistake in temperature and the amount of water. It is right after this incident that Ruby has the strange dream. She decides to go on with Nick as if her lesbian desire were sufficiently repressed, and she and Nick even repaint Bell's kitchen together, as if he is already a family member of the Lees.

On the night when Nick stays at the Lees' house after helping to paint, Bell catches Ruby in bed with Nick. This invasion of privacy is a defining moment when she realizes that she returned home to rescue her mother and begins to wonder whether maybe it is herself that she needs to save from her own anxiety. Ruby's tendency to give preference to others is shown in her way of cooking. She has always cooked for others in order to satisfy her own thirst for physical contact or just communication, and, in the process, she becomes food herself, offered for others to eat, but not for herself to satisfy her own hunger. Ruby's life with her mother is a suitable place for her to cheat her desires and remain a selfless subject or an object in this case because she is performing for others' appetites.

As if to end this procrastination and the pre-Oedipal-like mother-daughter life, Bell tells Ruby, "You're a big girl now. No good to live with your ma anymore" (213). Ruby, who

still wants to live in the fantasy, however, wants to “throw herself at her mother” and tell her that she only pretends to be an adult (213). In order to conclude the fantasy, but not to hurt Ruby’s feelings, Bell says, “Somebody told me there’s lots of hurricanes in Florida. Not a good time to go. Tell you what. You take that money you saved up and you get your own apartment” (214). Moving out solves some of her problems, such as maintaining privacy, but can she deal with the anxiety about sexuality and racial shame that still bother her?

Racist Love

Autonomy and independence as a single woman may be insufficient for a Chinese American daughter to resolve cultural tensions and find her voice. Besides her concern for her mother, racial and sexual anxieties prevent Ruby from asserting herself. While she faces traumatic memories of being discriminated against based on her race and ethnicity, the origin of her racial shame which is so far not touched upon in her narrative, she also faces the heterosexual demand that constrains her blossoming queerness. This simultaneous incidence of the two issues is not surprising because race and sexuality matters are inevitably correlated in a relationship between an Asian woman and a white man. After moving out of the apartment, Ruby is asked to a party, where she meets a girl, Hazel. It is like a love at first sight: “Hazel and Ruby talked and looked at each other. It seemed an agreement that they would leave together at the end of the evening, although no one said anything about it” (231).

However, she is not sure of the “agreement,” eventually loses her courage, and leaves the party alone. She thinks of Nick and “suddenly it seemed wrong that she was with Nick. He seemed too tall or maybe too pale. Too easy somehow” (231). She says she will wind up in a house with a white picket fence before she realizes it if she remains with Nick. Choosing a heterosexual life is “easy,” thus tempting, but now it seems “wrong.” She cannot go on with Nick after she realizes how much she is attracted to Hazel. However, Nick is good in bed and Ruby, right after the party, visits Nick intending to“fuck away any regret she had” (232). After the sex, as usual, they order Chinese food. Actually, Ng deliberately avoids using the word “Chinese” to describe the food, and instead it is called “greasy gringo food” from “Hunan Delight” (233, 232). The difference between Chinese food and gringo food indicates that the scene does not refer to the title, as many reviewers believe it to do. Having a meal after sex seems like a casual ritual, but, for Ruby, eating food with someone is also a way to show her affection, as her family does. Everything looks normal, but after the food has arrived and “[t]he smell of greasy gringo food mixed with the smell of sex,” “[f]or the first time, the sight of his soft penis didn’t seem to fit with the tins of dumplings, noodles, rice. It had just been in her mouth, but suddenly she didn’t want it so near her food” (233). Why does she suddenly suffer this discomfort in her nose?

Gringo Chinese food, which is nothing like her mother’s homemade Chinese food, could be considered American or something in between American and Chinese. It is like the

Chinese American herself. The Lees rarely eat those gringo foods in restaurants, and never at home, just like Ruby had never had sex in her parents' house. The gringo foods and sex are something not Chinese, something not officially allowed in Ruby's parents' house. Now that Ruby has had sex in the basement of her home, this principle no longer works, and the two things seem unfitted together although the smells are mixed. Food, which is used as a way to show affection in her family, is divorced from sex, which in modern American society is often considered to be a result of love and affection. Right before Ruby visits Nick, she reconfirms her affection for him, but now she realizes that love and sex do not always go together as food and sex do not (231). She can enjoy sex with Nick or any other men, but it does not have to be based on affection for them. This realization is like a grease stain on her dark silk robe that she wears while eating. The stain "would never come out unless she got up and did something right away. On any other day, she would have jumped up and soaked it in soapy water," but she does nothing about it then (233). She notices something more important about Nick while talking to him. While she is talking "[h]e was eating all the good meaty bits and leaving the bony parts for her. This made her quiet, and she felt sad suddenly that she loved a man who took the good bits for himself" (234). Giving the good bits to each other is not just a typical table manner, but the way "they would take care of each other" (234).

Ruby is disappointed in Nick's foodways but is still "afraid" of facing her homosexual desire, which means his eating habit is not the only reason she eventually ditches him (236).

As she talks to him about meeting Hazel, she remembers when she was in the sixth grade. She and her friend Mary Ann practiced kissing under the bed cover and "[t]hey became good at it and Ruby became afraid that she would like practicing better than the real thing" (236). The discourse of heterosexuality was already so strong that she had to refuse more practicing with Mary Ann. She goes back into Nick's arms as if to confirm her heterosexuality, but when he starts talking, relieved that, in the party, it was a girl that Ruby had kissed and not a man (Ruby actually kissed no one at the party), Ruby's disappointment in him becomes total. He says,

> You know, it's funny how people say, "Oh, isn't she beautiful when she's angry?" … How can they mean that? They're just saying that. Just before, when you were standing there in your robe, not holding me, not even looking at me – you know it drives me crazy when you do that, when you go so far away – I was thinking, Who is that ugly Chinese woman standing in my room? But now here you are and you're beautiful. I don't even notice your Chineseness. You're just Ruby who I love. (236)

Calling your girlfriend ugly is already insulting, but there is a more insidious implication in his remark. This confession of love, that he loves her no matter her race, might sound righteous, but it also indicates that he is just colorblind, that he does not care what she has been through as a Chinese American girl. This kind of racist love does not appeal to Ruby,

who suddenly notices that Nick's hands around her feels "unbearably heavy" (236-37). She gets up and goes to the bathroom to brush her teeth, remembering other moment of racial discrimination when she was in the third grade.

There was a penmanship teacher, Mrs. Strain, whom everybody hated but Ruby secretly liked. One day, as homework, she wrote five words; three across and two on the next line. The next day, when she submits it, she notices other students have written either five across or five down, but she thinks the difference is insignificant. Mrs. Strain, however, upon taking her notebook, "wrinkle[s] her nose as if she smelled some food she didn't like" and remarks, "What is this? Some kind of crazy Chinese crossword puzzle? I don't have all day to figure this out" (237). Despite the racist comment from the teacher, she fights her anger and mortification by looking hard at the desk. She holds back her tears even when the classmates imitate "Asian" slant eyes and chant "Ching Chong, Ching Chong" (238). Now in Nick's bathroom, however, she faces the fact that even her boyfriend whom she had cared for shows how ignorant he is about her racial experience. She had already learned that Nick had used a laundry, which hurt her because, as a daughter of the family laundry, she believes "it was wrong, somehow, to pay someone to do it [wash your own dirt]" (180), but now it is confirmed that Nick actually does not care about her feelings very much, especially about her ethnic and class consciousness. Ruby "wanted to tell him why her face was twisted shut. Her angry face, her ugly Chinese face. Not you too, Nick, she said to him in her head, not when I

trusted you with my face, trusted you not to slap it and twist it out of shape" (238).

This reminiscence is probably the most racist, traumatic moment in the novel, and it is repressed until this climax. She must face her lesbian desire while dealing with her racial consciousness, both of which are frustrated by heterosexual demand, temptation, and racial ignorance, which come from her trusted boyfriend. It is not explicitly mentioned, but apparently because of this incident, they eventually break up. Although breaking up with Nick may help her to escape the heterosexual and monogamous demand that has made her restless, the remaining nagging feeling that her mother is imprisoned in her house is not resolved.

Recipe of Love

The emergence of the Chinese American daughter's subjectivity is intertwined with the process of coming to terms with the generational and gendered differences as well as the associations arising from class consciousness. Ruby's guilty feeling for Bell stems from the image of her mother toiling away and imprisoned in her house. Such an image is also linked to the family's laundry business itself. To resolve her guilt requires reconfiguring this chain of widespread negative images of a self-sacrificing Chinese immigrant mother and typical Chinese immigrants' jobs in America. After moving to the apartment, Ruby leaves all the unwashed laundry around the room or piled up in the closet (228). She might just be busy

temping, but does not clearly explain the reason for the disregard. Readers, however, would know that she cannot use laundry service because of her morality. She knows from her experience that it is not a job one can be proud of, particularly when one must serve arrogant customers (mostly white), who demand to open the store before its opening time and never retrieve their laundry. The store is already full of forgotten packages piled up to the ceiling, and even the family's residential area is invaded by them. It is also linked with the image of her oppressed mother, who chokes on her father's smoke and works all day without one word of gratitude from him.

This miserable image of her family gradually changes throughout the novel. The narrative introduces Franklin's abandoned love for a white lady and his loneliness in the family. His victimization of his wife stems from his own experience as a victim of racism and the American social system. For instance, he does not allow Bell to go to language school because he fears other men stealing his wife, a fear arising from the demographic gender imbalance caused by the anti-Chinese law. However, now when Ruby returns home and tells him to be kind to Bell, he is ready to show his affection to his wife. He shows his love through food sharing, for instance, when the Lees and Nick go to a Chinese restaurant (206-7), but its ultimate form is his giving Bell tickets to Florida as her sixtieth birthday gift (244). He has long been aware how much Bell has wanted to visit her friends in Florida. At first, Bell thinks about visiting them with her husband, but she realizes that it does not change

anything; they could go to Florida, but they will be the same people. Ultimately, she realizes that Florida is not the answer to her problem. Although it initially seems that the gift is a failure, once Bell understands that the two pieces of paper are tickets to Florida (she does not read English), "[h]e [Franklin] lean[s] toward her [Bell]. She lean[s] toward him too for just a moment" as if to exchange gratitude together (244).

Ruby herself seems unconcerned about Bell's choice to drop the Florida trip plan. This new flexibility is due to her recognition of her own needs. Indeed, although Ruby initiates the Florida plan, she begins to sense that something is wrong with the trip once it draws close, and they buy a suitcase and bathing suits (200). She says, "All the summer, Ruby had worked on convincing her mother to go on this trip, but now that she had said yes, Ruby didn't know why she didn't feel happy about it. When she first moved back home, she had felt coerced…. But no one was forcing her to go on vacation and stay in the oceanfront room and drink piña coladas by the pool. But somehow she still felt coerced" (200). This kind of realization, that she does not feel right the way she had expected to, recurs when Bell finally talks back to Franklin, which Ruby always wanted her to do because she is sick of Franklin's verbal abuse and feels guilty because she used to do it together with him when she was younger. Bell and Franklin argue about a trap for squirrels that ruin Bell's tomatoes. While Franklin demands to use it, Bell hates it for some reason and throws it away. When Ruby hears about her mother's response, she comments that she "waited to feel triumphant

too. All her life, she had waited for her mother to stand up to her father. But now Ruby couldn't understand why she felt so sad and small" (178-79). She does not feel exultant because now she can understand Franklin's mode of showing affection (in this case buying a trap for Bell's tomatoes), yet ultimately, it is Bell's triumph (she was actually "triumphant" about throwing away the trap (178)) and not hers. These misunderstandings of her own feelings reveal that it is not Bell that Ruby has to rescue but herself, and that she fundamentally misunderstands Bell as a permanent victim.

Indeed, she needs help to decide what she really wants. She knows she needs physical contacts but cannot decide from whom. She thinks of falling from the stairs, just to be nursed by parents who would touch her face to see if she is alright, while she wants Nick to touch her face during sex. Although she is just as satisfied with sex with other men who actually touch her face, she also dreams of a girl touching her face. She has to figure out what she really wants, and an answer unexpectedly comes from her parents. Ruby does not know how to love because of the parents' failed marriage, but now sees that their parents actually can show their love not only through food, but also through other gestures. If Bell is not a total victim as she had imagined, Ruby does not have to save her. All summer, Ruby has been obsessed with the idea of taking Bell away to Florida because of the "nagging feeling" (16), and in this obsession, her lesbian desire emerges as love for her mother. She is not mistaken about difference between filial affection and sexual desire. Instead, it is a necessary step to

recognize her lesbian orientation because without her desire toward her mother, it cannot find its safe place to be expressed in the first place. One of the answers she comes up with for the resolution of the “nagging feeling” is her gift for her mother.

Ruby’s gift for Bell’s birthday is a pair of sneakers. Ruby buys the pair because she remembers Bell’s story that she used to be a reckless girl who caught bees just to taste one drop of honey inside them and also that Franklin told her on the phone that recently Bell was always out doing something even Franklin does not know (100, 226-27). Bell, contrary to her images of being imprisoned in her house and under Franklin’s dictatorship, is originally an active girl who has private moments outside the house. Ruby gradually learns that Bell is not always what she had thought. Giving sneakers, designed for sports and physical exercise, is intended to bolster Bell’s capacity to leave the house. The narrative does not show an actual scene where Bell walks in the sneakers outside, but Ruby imagines that Bell first walks around the house and then eventually into the town and even to the places she has never been before, without any fear. This new image dispels a shameful moment in the past, when Bell was once humiliated in a store for using a wrong English expression when she was fresh off the boat (33, 246-47). Ruby’s hopeful re-vision concludes as follows: “She [Bell]’d keep running, the sound of her own breathing in her ears, arms and legs pumping their long easy stride, taking her away to another place” (247). Of course, Bell cannot go anywhere beyond her walking range, but as Bell is satisfied with a gesture of love (giving the tickets), not with

love itself (going to Florida together), what Ruby needs is an opportunity to free herself from the feeling of guilt for Bell.

Foodways to Mother

Using the trope of food, the narrative establishes a safe place to express Ruby's queer desire. Ruby's dream demonstrates that the prohibition against incest is a social construct. Ruby also knows love as something people give one another as they share food and is based on mutual agreement, which she could not gain in a relationship with Nick who keeps all the meaty bits for himself. He cares for Ruby so much that he helps her and Bell paint the kitchen all day long, but when it comes to food, he cannot share the idea with Ruby, for whom food is a vital communication tool. What has changed since the incest dream is that Ruby discovers that Bell is an autonomous subject who does not always need her help. Bell has a private moment for walking around town, and Ruby can only imagine what she is up to. Ruby must figure out a new relationship with her mother, one that is based on mutual autonomy. The answer is, as expected, through food, and this is where her ethnic identity is also reconfigured from a source of shame to something she cherishes.

As she becomes bored with and fed up with her temp job, which is like laundry for her—doing things for others that they should do for themselves—she becomes more interested in cooking, more precisely, going to a cooking school. Cooking is one of the two

things she is good at (the other is sex); her learning begins when she helps her recovering mother and continues in her freshman year in her college residence hall. It is not only a means of giving, but also a communication skill and sometimes a sexual language, words to express her desire to be in touch with others. When she meets Hazel, she suddenly thinks in detail of making a personalized dinner for her (230). She asks Hazel to meet for dinner while she actually thinks of kissing her (230). If she wants a relationship, there must be food. When she asks Franklin on the phone to ask Bell for a sea bass recipe, she not only requests the actual recipe, but also gestures to creating a relationship with her mother and even with her father. The recipe itself is meaningful since it is not an Americanized Chinese food, but her mother's authentic Chinese cuisine. Ruby's act of asking for the recipe implies she will not discard her ethnic heritage even in the process of assimilation (which is exemplified in her move to Manhattan). While talking with Nick, she realizes she does not know how to love because she does not love herself. Recognizing her own ethnicity is one step toward loving herself including her ethnic heritage, but to do so, she must come to terms with one problem: laundry.

Since moving to the new place from her Queens home, she cannot bring herself to do laundry. It is clear that her ethics make her hesitate to use a laundry service even though she excuses herself, giving reasons like she now has to do everything her mother did for her, such as making meals, while working as a temp. She realizes that things are not always as they

seem, that the laundry business has not always ruined her family. The practical situation, that she needs fresh clothes but does not have any detergent in hand, finally wins over her cultural hesitation, and Ruby visits a laundromat that has a laundry service. Dumping the bag of clothes on the counter, she is so nervous that she touches the bag "much as she liked to touch her stomach after eating a big dinner" (249). She is still not sure if her decision is right, but then there is an odd description of a TV program aired on the laundry's TV. The program shows

> people standing next to piles of rubble that just a few hours ago had been their homes. The roof and the ceiling and the walls were gone, but a few things stood upright, like a refrigerator on a front lawn. A woman opened the door of the refrigerator and took something out and ate it. It looked like a pickle. A few people were stooped over, as if suddenly old. Others looked down the street as if they had misplaced their houses and would remember any minute that they lived across the street, where the buildings were still standing. (250)

Apparently, the program describes the aftermath of some natural disaster. The people lost their homes and have to rebuild them. In a way, Ruby is one of them, leaving her Queens parents' home and now having to make it on her own. Before visiting the laundromat, she "had never felt quite so alone," where the "bundle of clothes lay on the floor in front of her" (249). Laundry or dirty clothes are signifiers of home for her, but now they are in front of

Ruby, who lives alone. Being alone is something she needed when she was home, but now it makes her anxious. As the TV program suggests, however, it is also a chance to reconfigure the concept of "home," just as the people in the program would recall where they had lived sometime soon. As the laundry woman, apparently the wife of the old couple working there, weighs the clothes and gives Ruby the ticket, she feels "such relief that she wanted to climb onto the scale, curl up on top of her laundry and close her eyes" (250). She leaves the laundry as she watches in the TV program, "[b]ridges buckled and cars slid into the ocean," implying that this is a catastrophic moment for her laundry ethic (250).

She succeeds in leaving the dirty clothes in the laundry, but still her mindset is in turmoil because all day long she imagines in detail what the old couple does to her clothes (250-51). This is one way to deal with her sense of guilt: by not forgetting the service, by describing their work in detail, she compensates for the guilty conscience arising from paying someone to wash her dirt. She even "put her head down as she passed the laundromat" that day (251), which indicates she still struggles to deal with the guilt. At home, she takes out the laundry ticket and she thinks of the ticket to Florida her father gave Bell, a subtle sign of reconciliation between her parents. In this moment, she reconfigures her prior memories of the miserable family laundry business because she associates the contemporary laundromat with her own family's laundry business, in which her parents actually show their affection to each other. She calls her parents' home in Queens and, instead of talking about the Florida

tickets, she asks again for the sea bass recipe, as if she is trying to reconnect with her ethnic heritage. She uses the Chinese recipe to speak about the Florida tickets that had changed her view of the parents' failed marriage.

As she returns to the laundromat, she finds the old couple cleaning the floor and has to fight an urge to help them and tell them that she just used the service this time only. Although there is no struggle to receive the clean clothes, she knows she will never use this laundromat again and has to use another one that is four blocks away, which has dryers that are never hot enough and customers who steal one another's clothes. Returning home, while listening to Bell's sea bass recipe on the answering machine, she unpacks the package and finds every piece of her clothing is washed so clean and folded so neatly that "[i]t seemed a shame to wear any of it and start to dirtying it all over again" (252). After all, she could not overcome her guilt of using a laundry service, but this also demonstrates that she could use one if she has to. Her laundry ethics is already part of her, and it is not an easy task to discard it completely.

The subtle ending with Bell's recipe, which does not definitively answer the question of how a Chinese American should live, ultimately sheds light on the form Ruby's sexuality and ethnic consciousness will take. Even after breaking up with Nick, she still imagines calling him, seeing him, and even inviting him home to have sex with him. After all, he is merely not as sensitive to her ethnic consciousness as she is, and she still likes him, especially

sex with him. She does not even mention Hazel in the end while she thinks of Nick. She is not depicted as someone who is totally heterosexual or homosexual. Her attitude towards sexuality is not definite, nor is her sexuality invisible. In a compulsory/compulsively heterosexual society, sexuality is always and only considered to be visible and fixed as hetero and homo, but Ruby just wants to have sex when and with whom she wants.

Whereas “appetite” in mainstream American context would ordinarily maintain a clear distinction between the privileged yet highly constrained domain of sexuality and mundane domestic activities, the narrative opens up the possibility of a more fluid conception of desire. In this context, desire—appetitive or otherwise—may take multiple forms and be developed and fulfilled in multiple ways. Thus, Ruby’s apparent promiscuity can be explained by her cultural idea of cooking and eating. Just as cooking is a bond between them, Ruby’s love has found its way into cooking because food is also a way to express one’s love and affection to another in her family. When she imagines how she will cook for Hazel, it is for her a way to express affection. This is not one-sided affection. When Ruby leaves home again, Bell cooks numerous Chinese meals to take with her, as if they are a kind of final offering. One may wonder whether filial love is the same as sexual desire, but as she understands through her dream of eating dogs and having sex with her mother, it is a social demand that separates and categorizes sexualities and thus affection and desires into a proper heterosexual integration, which she fears as a white picket fence that closes her in. Therefore

Ruby's request for the Chinese recipe reflects how much she cherishes her ethnic heritage and how much she still loves her mother in her own way, one that rejects the separation of sexual love and filial affection. The recipe is a passage for Ruby to Bell and her family. It indicates that she will be a subject who chooses to cook for others as a means of showing her affection while being comfortable with her own ethnic background. She has cooked for others and tends to ignore her own desires by making food and offering herself as food. The recipe implies that she will make and eat Chinese foods for her loved ones, even after sex, as the title says. The title registers the possibility of her desired status, in which she can practice her own foodways while being honest to her sexual needs.

If the subject of eating Chinese food naked in the title does not refer to Nick who in the novel actually eats Americanized Chinese food naked, the title could be suggestive of Ruby's future, in which she comfortably eats Chinese food made with Bell's recipes after having sex with whomever she wants. That is something Ruby seeks afterward because cooking and sex are what she is good at and enjoys as well as a means of expressing love and affection, a means of communicating, and thus a means of survival in any community. *Eating Chinese Food Naked* does not deliver readers the definite answer the other novels seem to provide, but it shows how one Chinese American girl survives as a queer, how she survives while being who she wants to be, through the metaphor of foodways. The Chinese recipe at the end indicates self-respect, a source of survival, and also love and respect for her parents.

The theme of a queer survivor may not seem unusual from the millennium perspective, but it is nonetheless significant because of the tension between ethnic solidarity and queer strategies, which are unfortunately often misunderstood to have different goals. The novel shows how one queer Chinese American girl survives while paying respect to her own ethnic heritage through the language of foods which is, after all, essential and necessary to survival, but could be also something pleasurable, even extravagant.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The mother-daughter relationship in Chinese American women writers' texts has been analyzed almost exclusively in feminist readings, for good reasons. Mothers and daughters must fight the sexism within their own ethnic community, as well as the rascism and sexism in mainstream American society. Indeed, because the relationship consists in not only personal matters, but also cultural, historical and political factors, narratives that treat it occupy rich territory and invite nuanced readings that problematize assumptions characterizing both the relationship and the context in which it is played out. Throughout the dissertation, I have demonstrated how the daughter heroines and the narrators try to reconfigure their relationships with their mothers through cultural translation in unique ways. The heroine of *The Woman Warrior* translates her Chinatown experience into an American context to become a speaking subject in the English-speaking society of America, while Jing-mei in *The Joy Luck Club* revises and reconceives her mother's Chinese words and mysterious stories to free herself from a sense of guilt for having betrayed her mother. Leila in *Bone* and Ruby in *Eating Chinese Food Naked* also face similar guilt before making their own way outside their parents' homes. The following sections will situate the novels in a larger discussion of the central features of mother-daughter relationships and cultural translation in order to show their significance across the four narratives and to argue for their

long-term function for Chinese American women's novels in general.

Myriads of Mother-Daughter Relationships

As we have seen, the mother and daughter relationships function as more than personal relationships in each novel. They have different meanings and the apparent similarities shared among them is merely the result of prejudice, which the authors carefully unpack in their narratives to reveal the uniqueness of each story, of each heroine and her relationships. Ruby in *Eating Chinese Food Naked* fails to differentiate her filial affection from lesbian desire, which reflects her indecision about separating her ethnic identity and American identity because "love" and ethnicity are an expression and a quality of the two inseparable identities. In Ruby's mindset, Chineseness means to sacrifice and to give as a dutiful daughter, while Americanness involves choice and freedom; but it is not easy for her to firmly separate the two qualities. While the university experience plays a huge role in her learning of American ways, she had long been exposed to America through her experience in Queens. It is not just her Chineseness that bothers her but the inferiority resulting from being from a lower economic class. She is definitely an American girl, but maintains her difference because of her racial experience. Whether she separates or fuses the two identities, the idea of two stand-alone identities fails to accommodate the ambiguity of her ethnic identity. Her relationship with her mother is a nexus of these sexual, cultural, ethnic and class matters, and

she learns to express her desire and ethnic pride in the relationship. The frustration of dealing with two cultures and two identities is already articulated by the heroine of *The Woman Warrior*, who asks, “Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese. What Chinese tradition and what is the movies?” (5-6). Their Chineseness and Americanness cannot be completely separated nor can they be fused together as if the transition and translation between the two were seamless, a tension exposed frequently as the heroine of *The Woman Warrior* fails in her efforts at cultural translation.

The ending of *Eating Chinese Food Naked* thus denies the goal-oriented ending of traditional Bildungsroman, which aims for order and maturity from the chaos of adolescence. It is not clear what her sexuality will be like. This indecisive ending may be due to the author’s youth, particularly when compared to the other heroines’ ages (Kingston was 36 years old, Tan and Fae Meynne Ng 37, and Mei Ng 31 when their fist novels were published). A similar open ending is also found in *Bone*’s plot, in which Leila does not resolve all the problems she faces before her departure, such as the unknown reason for her sister’s suicide. She only promises herself that she will not forget where she comes from geographically, historically, and culturally. In this way, the past can validate her in reality, from which Asian American subjects have often been excluded in mainstream representation.

In the two novels, *Eating Chinese Food Naked* and *Bone*, the mother-daughter relationship is a metaphor for Chineseness and a comfortable space in which the daughters sometimes feel locked. It is also identified with Chinatown itself in *Bone* and Queens in *Eating*, respectively. Those spaces, Chinatown and (the home in) Queens, represent a living past that will be left behind but certainly not forgotten. The departure—from the parents' home, from the Chinese mother, or even from a merely "partial" Chinese setting—involves movement across physical space and transformation of the daughter's identity. In *The Woman Warrior*, the heroine leaves her Chinatown community to see things from an American perspective (which is different from her mother's). Leila and Ruby leave their homes to establish their own lives outside the cultural bonds of Chinatown and the moral expectations maintained at their parents' houses, such as filial duty and sexual taboos. Although Jing-mei's story is not centered on leaving Chinatown or her parents' home, she ultimately returns to China to reconfigure her understanding of the Chinese American woman subject and to atone for her having betrayed her mother. I would not argue that one method of resolution is "healthier" or "more recommended" than another, but it is possible to say that Leila and Ruby's narratives embrace the ambiguity of their Chinese American identity because while living outside Chinatown or the hometown, they are still affected by those family homes and thus must reconsider their past experience. Despite the stress and occasional pain involved in negotiating identity as they do, their strategies nonetheless avoid problematic and impossible

tactics such as trying to totally forget the past or to externalize, encapsulate, and revere it like specimens in museums. They remember or hold space for their past so that it will not haunt them like a melancholic ghost.

"Melancholic" does not mean that one is always haunted by a lost thing, but, in the case of Kingston's heroine, she imagines that she has lost something she never actually had or would not have in the ways she imagines. She thinks she has lost China because her parents taught her about it as a reality in which American logic does not work and because they call her "kuei," half-Chinese and half-American, someone incomplete. According to her parents, she would have been whole if she were raised in China. Although China is an imagined return address for her, it is real for her parents, and, just as a secret can be handed down through generations as a taboo, this imagined space of China has also become a version of reality for the heroine. Her parents abandon all claims to their property in China, and they ultimately lose their home country. This relinquishment does not mean that they can be American instead, in legal or even cultural terms; they are still regarded Chinese immigrants who will go back home someday. "Where are you really from?" is not an obsolete question, for Asian Americans are asked it even today (Hsieh).

As the daughter of the immigrant parents, the heroine's position in American society is equally and often still more complicated. Because the heroine does not learn English before kindergarten, English is a second language for her. Because she is raised in Chinatown, she

has been culturally segregated. As a result, she must try hard to assimilate into American society later. In addition to this, her mother complicates the idea of women. Despite the misogynistic culture of Chinatown and her Chinese mother insisting on her being an obedient Chinese daughter, her mother tells the heroine of a legendary woman warrior, teaching her that women are capable of self-realization. These conflicting concepts of women generated by her mother reflect the deep conflict that shapes the mother-daughter relationship. She resists her mother's image of the ideal woman while being overwhelmed and mesmerized by her Chinese stories because, for the young heroine, those stories provide significant information that validate her as a Chinese American girl and tell her who she is even though they sound absurd and crazy.

Once she is outside Chinatown, she "can no longer see a spirit in a skirt made of light" but instead sees "a voiceless girl dancing when she thought no one was looking" (205). She no longer sees a spirit, synonym for ghost, but instead sees a girl, an embodied existence. It is as if she has awoken from dreaming now that she lives outside Chinatown, in a logical world where she thinks in a logical way. It is, however, also a blank world where "colors are gentler and fewer; smells are antiseptic" (205). She tries to investigate all the dubious Chinese stories she has heard by visiting China, in an effort to disillusion herself. As if to compensate for this dull world with artistic creativity, at the end of the novel, she recalls the stories of her grandmother, who loves plays, and of a famous Chinese poetess in order to connect herself to

traditional Chinese artistry of storytelling. To some extent, she remains obsessed with the China stories even though she is doubtful about some of them. Ultimately, she stops short of exposing all the Chinese lies because she discovers that to condemn Chinese practices is actually to implicate herself.

This combination of obsessive effort and procrastination to overcome her Chineseness is a façade that barely covers her traumatic memories, which include her parents' memories. When she returns home, she faces what the racial stratification of the labor market has done to her mother's health. At the same time, she finds that she is nonetheless more attracted to the idea of multiculturalism and something like the Spivakian utopian idea of a planetary world, where a person can live wherever she wants, even though she knows her mother is powerless outside Chinatown and its community. She also recounts her own story of being fired for supporting the NAACP. In this racist reality, the Chinese stories function as the few keys that connect her to her ethnic heritage and validate her Chinese subjectivity in American society, where she cannot be "white" despite her attempts (she has tried to behave in American feminine ways by whispering when talking in order to get a date). This is why she clings to China, where she has never been, and why she suffers melancholy about her ethnic identity, one inflected by desires for experiences and knowledge she never had.

The mother-daughter relationship in *The Woman Warrior* occupies a complex space, in which her mother's stories contribute to the heroine's sense of confidence as a woman,

while her mother's own life trajectory and behaviors instill doubt and confusion, thereby generating a mix of positive and negative messages about her own identity. The conflicting messages she receives from her mother are exemplified in the plot of each chapter, as each concludes with representations of opposing ideas and images. Conflicting images also appear throughout the novel and anticipate the rise of the heroine's anxiety. Although the heroine's ultimate position as a cultural bridge between China and America suggests a degree of resolution, it also confines her self worth within the interstices of culture, as a Chinese American woman in America. Thus the novel dramatizes the anxiety of assimilation, which is often buried in the discourse of the American Dream. Not surprisingly, then, not even the redemptive ending resolves all the questions raised by the novel.

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* also deals with ways in which mothers' China stories affect their daughters' subject formation. As in the other novels, she does not offer a straightforward answer to the questions posed by her narrative. One of the mothers, Ying-ying, is so traumatized by her first husband in China that she seeks out all the bad omens in her daughter's life in America and tries to prevent them without talking about what actually happened in China. As a result, her daughter, Lena, becomes a fearful woman who trivializes herself. This vicious circle of women's disempowerment is a product of old China's patriarchy as well as the racist and Orientalist ideas about ethnic women in America. Ying-ying's first Chinese husband has the power to defame her because of the social system,

and her second American husband thinks he has saved her from the poverty of an under-developed country even though Ying-ying actually descends from aristocracy. In this case, the second husband has internalized a Western fantasy that white men can save colored women from their evil, backward fellowmen. Despite being criticized for self-Orientalism, Tan actually succeeds in depicting many nuances in the social, historical, cultural dynamics of mother-daughter relationships.

Tan's narrative embraces both personal and political perspectives, but, as the ending shows, Jing-mei's narrative depends on her coming to terms with the ambiguity of being a Chinese American woman. Unlike Kingston's heroine who depends on historicizing herself as a Chinese subject, Ts'ai Yen, Jing-mei uses generational kinship to validate herself by situating herself in a matrileneage. Mother-daughter relationships in *The Joy Luck Club* are spaces in which daughters may come to own their ethnic identity, not merely as a political construct, but rather as part of the foundation in their ongoing individual development. To some extent, Tan's personalization of mother-daughter relationships seems counter to Kingston's politicization of them, but this categorization is just based on their individual narrative approach. Each novel exposes the interplay between political and personal factors, and, as stated above, it is not my place to judge which novel's resolution is better. Perhaps more importantly, beyond recognizing that the two novels were published in different times and different contexts, it is misleading to compare the two novels just because they treat

similar topics and are written by Chinese American women.

In addition to her apparent celebration of America and Orientalism, one reason behind much of the criticism of Tan is that her works are often compared with Kingston's works. In the still-narrow field of Asia American literature, connecting the two might be unavoidable. Nonetheless, it is unfair to consistently or exclusively group writers together because they share the same ethnicity. Those critics often forget the differences in the novels' publication dates and historical contexts. Perhaps it is fairer to say that both writers examine what it means to be a Chinese American woman; they simply come to different conclusions because of their historical positions. While *The Woman Warrior*'s ending reveals the heroine's anxiety for assimilation, *The Joy Luck Club* ultimately considers ethnicity to be a family or private matter. As a child of baby boomers and a member of the Me generation, it is no surprise that Tan came to this conclusion. While it was popular to be political in Kingston's generation, in Tan's it was more important to hold space for the personal. One critique of the tendency toward individualism is that it leads to depoliticization. The cinematized version of *The Joy Luck Club* shows the American daughters holding professional jobs such as a copywriter or a restaurant designer and living in a stylish designer house or luxurious residence, symbols of assimilation and success that are exactly what their mothers had hoped for them. In a society framed by American materialism, it is no longer fashionable to accuse the society of reproducing racial discrimination: Lena can only show off her now-popular exotic beauty and

Jing-mei recalls a memory of her racial inferiority as “familiar old pain.” For some heroines, instead of condemning American society, they try to dissolve the pain through their relationship to the family, thus taking refuge in the personal, whereas Kingston’s heroine tries to find consolation in her cultural heritage, which indicates she seeks solutions in a larger community of Chinese Americans. Mother-daughter relationships in the four novels have different meanings in each context, and while it is helpful to compare those novels in terms of the women’s bonds, they could be read as a motif.

In the myriad of mother-daughter relationships, traditional images of the relationships are overwritten and represented with additional, complex nuances. At the same time, we also see behind the stage of Chinatown, where actual people lead their lives as complicated subjects and not as stage props in a show for cultural tourists. The complexity is important in representations of minorities because it defies the generalizations and simplifications that enable a story about an ethnic drama to be easily consumed as exotica. Leila’s narrative in *Bone* carefully unpacks the past and reveals the human side of Leila’s mother, whom she initially considers to be an embodiment of the traditional Chinese mother. The intricacy of the relationship resists stereotyped images of Chinese Americans and shows the characters to be complicated, just like any other Americans or human beings. As I argued in the introduction, the mothers in Chinatown should be read with historical facts in mind. As a result of the discrimination they face outside Chinatown, as well as the language barrier, they are confined

in Chinatown. In Bell's case, her husband worries about the danger of other men seducing her not entirely because of jealousy, but because of his uncertain gender position, which is generated by the racial stratification of the American labor market. His occupation as a laundry man is not masculine enough to protect his wife from other men. Such context helps to clarify the significance behind Ruby reveling in her imagination about Bell walking freely in neighborhood beyond her familiar area.

In the reconfiguration and re-imagination of their mothers, Chinatown and their communities as well as the relationship between these and the outside society also shift. This change is clear in Leila's narrative, in which the dismal image of Chinatown is transformed, becoming a place that validates her identity. Through their mother-daughter relationships, each heroine reconsiders her ideas about her mother and the historical circumstances that inform her as a Chinese American subject. Mother-daughter relationships reveal the range of emotional communication between ethnic subjects who are usually depicted as stereotyped objects. Through these relationships, the daughters develop new understanding and discover their political and historical positions in American society. In each novel, the personal relationships politicize the acknowledged positions of the Chinese immigrant mothers and their American daughters and complicate the subjectivity of Chinese/American women. One especially crucial dynamic that defies any facile comprehension of Chinese American is cultural translation.

Fantasy of Translation

As I argued in the introduction, for the heroines who must translate in everyday life, translation is their way of thinking. Their translational narratives also shape their unique subject formation. In *The Woman Warrior*, the function of translational narrative is clearest when the heroine retells the story of her adulterous aunt in China. In her mother's account, the aunt is certainly a sinful woman who should be a negative example for her daughter, but in the heroine's imagination, the aunt becomes a woman of her own agency, a desiring subject rather than a victim of sexual objectification. This refiguring retains a deep ambivalence, however. Although she feels gratified about exposing the existence of her aunt, who had vanished from the family, she also feels guilty for exposing her. Her conflicting emotions appear at the end of every chapter, and her translational narrative thus reveals her own unstable status in America as a Chinese American woman.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, it is easier to detect translational narratives because every daughter always makes an effort to discern what her mother really means. Because the mothers have tried to hide their traumatic and shameful past in China, their behaviors tend to be mysterious and illogical to their daughters. In most of the relationships, reconciliation is hopeful but only implied, whereas their translations are depicted as ways in which the mothers and daughters can become closer to each other, and also to an original meaning.

Such original meaning in the novel is not fixed as a single authentic signifier that defines Chinese experience or subjectivity or that of Chinese American women. Instead, it is often reconfigured in the mother's recollection and translated in the daughters' narratives. It is an object of cultural negotiation; in her negotiatory search, for example, Jing-mei interprets being a Chinese American as sharing memories with family members.

Leila in *Bone* utilizes her translational narrative to frame a critical self-evaluation and redefinition of her experience. Tracing back to when her family was still happy, she tries to reconstruct her painful memories. In a way, she tries to understand things in a different way, which is one of the characteristics of cultural translation. Her critical description of theatrical Chinatown reveals the Chinese American to be an honest and complex subject. In the course of her interrogative narrative, in which she continues asking why specific incidents occur, she develops a way to define herself before she moves out of Chinatown. As she separates from her parents and recognizes what she really wants, her narrative of perpetual interrogation reminds us that persisting in the search for "why" is more important than ultimately finding final answers. She redefines herself as a desiring subject, but still remembers where she comes from geographically, culturally and historically. Translation in Leila's narrative is a way to tell the difference between society's demands and what she really wants.

Ruby's translational narrative is the most similar to that of Kingston's heroine's. Ruby's oscillation between Queens and the city is described using the motifs of food and

sexualities, and it seems as though she cannot choose one over the other. A similar interplay of procrastination and hesitation can be found in *The Woman Warrior*, but the ambiguous ending is less melancholic than *The Woman Warrior*'s, perhaps because Ruby is more interested in her burgeoning bisexuality. Nonetheless, her ethnicity and sense of class inferiority also bear significantly on her subject formation. As to whether Ruby succeeds in cultural translation, a question arising in the conclusion of *The Woman Warrior*, she does not. Bell's message on the answering machine does not make it clear whether Ruby overcomes her lesbian desire for her mother or exchanges it for a more traditionally acceptable form of filial affection. Although the message about the traditional Chinese recipe confirms her decision to maintain ties to her ethnic heritage, the questions about the place love and sexuality remain unanswered. Be that as it may, such obscurity lies at the very heart of sexual ambiguity. Indeed, it is possible that the ending seems less depressing because she adopts an unapologetic attitude toward that ambiguity (Ruby makes no comment about the message), while Kingston's heroine is so anxious (The last line, "It translated well," hints at a hopeful future for the heroine), that it implies a disastrous result if her expectations are thwarted.

Ruby's narrative ending, Kingston's heroine's melancholic state, Leila's failure to find the answers, and Jing-mei's resolution with the vision of her dead mother all imply the vague threat that cultural translation can fail. At the same time, it is also clear that what is more important than successful or complete replication is its process, which unpacks myths of

seamless translation. Ultimately, all of the heroines fail to find what they have been searching for and find unexpected answers. However, in their pursuit, they learn important lessons, come to new understandings, and sufficiently extricate themselves from stereotyped representations of Chinese American women to find their own voices. How one defines oneself is a political issue because identity entails race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, and sexuality. When translation fails, the politics behind the myth of successful assimilation is exposed. After all, the factors of one's identity do not matter when translation occurs seamlessly. When the chasm in the national or community discourse is revealed, personal voices come into play and resist the stereotyped images ascribed to racial minorities.

At the same time, authorship may be recognized as reflecting an individual voice, one of more substance and integrity than that of a mere reporter of an ethnic census or a guidebook writer delivering a few useful cultural facts to use the next time one visits Chinatown. Although these autobiographical novels are often used in high school or university classes to help students learn about ethnic experiences, this anthropological treatment oversimplifies the unique racial experiences they depict. To be sure, the use of the novels as textbooks should not be condemned. Nonetheless, ignoring the personal voices in the narratives in favor of highlighting or picking up only "facts" or "tips" about an ethnic culture is wholly opposite the function of the literary. Such treatment of individual narratives relegates them to being vague, overgeneralized sound bites in national discourse and assigns

them too easily to a narrow political ethnic agenda. The writers' invention of translational narratives is not an easy interpretation of their Chinese American experience, which could be consumed as exotica or used as a portion of the national census. It is their artistic creation based on their Chinese American reality, and the creation proves their authorship.

From Aesthetics of Translation to Ethics of Translation

Translation as a form of art may sound odd to some, but as I have argued, the writers' translation is not limited in scope to linguistic, dictionary interpretations. In fact, they sometimes utterly fail to communicate the original meaning, as in the episode of the "reparition candy" in *The Woman Warrior* (170). My emphasis on the aesthetics of translation does not amount to a dismissal of the politics of translation or a denial of the significance of needing to translate to survive in everyday life. Idealizing Chinese Americans' translation merely functions to obscure the existing power relationships between Chinese and English. Nonetheless, a thorough analysis of those factors exceeds the scope of my argument. Moreover, Chinese itself contains manifold differences within the many dialects constitutive of the language, not to mention the power relationships among them. By depicting the translation process, the heroines reveal the difficulty, annoyance, and pain of translating in their daily lives. Such a complicated process reveals the political side of translation as well as individual voices. If one were to consider the artistic value of the translational narratives

considered in this discussion, it could be argued that each narrator searches valiantly for English equivalents to each Chinese word, and the uniqueness of the interpretations they invent is the beauty of translation, which is evident not only in their word choice, but also in their plots and stories.

Translation is also a way to recreate stories. The prefix “trans-” means “across,” and thus signals the movement from one place to another. It is the act of bringing words to another place, and sometimes it is considered interpretation. Translation is inherently an act of making a new thing out of an original. Kingston’s heroine makes a successful story out of a tale of two women’s vengeance upon a cheating husband and the miserable story of their failed attempt to change him. The episode shows that while one cannot change apparent facts, it is also important to see things from multiple sides. This is an urgent issue for Asian Americans, whose distorted representations pervade mainstream discourse about them. Translation is a way to provide an alternative view of the world for those who cannot understand the original language, or the individual realities of Chinese Americans that is not shown in an official census or sociological studies. Therein lies the beauty of translation and literary value in American literature. Realizing this value is significant in understanding what is at stake in Chinese American women writers’ survival in American literature, a point raised in the introduction. Creating a brand-new self-image might be difficult for new Asian American writers, but I believe that their efforts will suffice as long as they write stories that

explore new ways of understanding Chinese American experience and find ways to challenge acknowledged histories, thereby providing different perspectives. I am not denying the compelling influence of marketing strategies that demand authors produce exotica. But part of the significance of Chinese American women's writing in American literature is its translational narrative, which succeeds in simultaneously showcasing difference and the universal significance of novels or any other literary texts for understanding human experience.

The final question is how long the power of translational narrative might last. It is an expression of cultural interaction, and its duration is equal to that of Asian American literature itself. Asian American literature will not be completely assimilated into American letters so long as history, race, ethnicity and cultural difference matter. Because simply recognizing the difficulty of translation does not in itself resolve the needs that require it, as long as the issue of ethnic American identity matters, translational narrative will appear in texts. It might become subtle, as in the food motif in *Eating Chinese Food Naked*, but so long as there is a need or a drive for Chinese Americans to provide their version of reality, which is unknown to mainstream culture, it will be written.

This discussion treated the four Chinese American women writers' texts mainly in terms of mother-daughter relationships and cultural translation. Because translation produces unpredictable outcomes (for example, by opening spaces of miscommunication), it was

helpful to explore the issue of anxiety as it bears on translation and efforts to make meaning. Anxiety is an ambiguous term like translation because it has two meanings: hope and fear. Though the dissertation may have focused more attention on the word's negative connotation, this was done to highlight and challenge the academic tendency to overlook what in reality remains difficult and unresolved by only celebrating purely hopeful readings. To end my dissertation on a hopeful note, however, I would like to quote from Amy Tan's novel. She once made a Chinese American character, Olivia in *The Hundred Secret Senses*, say, "You can't stop people from wishing" (225). It is possible to say that this is why the heroines translate and the writers create stories: for a better understanding of themselves and their histories, and ultimately for others' better understanding of themselves.

Notes

1. Gilbert and Gubar do not provide an explicit solution to this undead mother. According to them, in *Snow White*, the queen mother is actually a writing, plotting woman, and the Snow White is the dead woman, an ideal woman, because she is once killed (dead) by feminine tools cursed by her stepmother (55). The queen must be free from the obedient woman inside, which is represented as the Snow White, while the Snow White has to battle with a stubborn woman inside, the queen (58). Gilbert and Gubar argue that the daughter has to seek an independent self behind the mother in the mirror, which is probably accomplished through writing (62). In the end, the queen is indeed executed as if she were a mad dancer, but as they argue in the following chapters, she wins her own world through writing (63).

2. *Of Women Born* was so inspiring that many creative writings, essay anthologies and papers were published after its publication (Hirsch 17, 129-30). Feminists' search for the mother can be found not only in literature studies, but also in fields such as psychoanalysis and sociology, in works such as Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978).

3. Maternal narratives are now often appropriated in the white women's texts, such as Rebecca Wells' *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* (1996).

4. Bella Adams takes up the issue of subaltern representation in terms of the Joy Luck mothers who are misunderstood in America because they do not speak English fluently (37-38).

5. The mother of the heroine, however, must replace some of the material for a Chinese ritual with Western products (185). Though she tries to reproduce the ritual, it has to be modified in America.

6. In “Grandma’s Story,” which deals with *The Woman Warrior*, Minh-ha privileges matrilineal stories of the third world and considers them to be a transcendent narrative source for women’s solidarity. When she remarks, “The storyteller, besides being a great mother, a teacher, a poetess, a warrior, a musician, a historian, a fairy, and a witch, is a healer and a protectress. Her chanting or telling of stories ... has the power of bringing us together” (140), she romanticizes the maternal figure as a pre-discursive subject with immense portents.

7. This is not by a Chinese American woman writer, but Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) tellingly depicts a symbiotic, exhausting, and internecine relationship between a mother and her ghost child.

8. Amy Tan’s *Rules for Virgins* (2011) and *The Valley of Amazement* (2013) deal with sexuality.

9. This association of Chinatown and the maternal figure, the feminization of Chinatown or, more precisely, maternalization of Chinatown, is also a negative representation of Chinese immigrants given that many Chinese male immigrants work at jobs that are traditionally assigned to women in America, such as waitress or laundress. It should also be

noted that Chinatown is a highly racialized space that is often associated with fantasy, absurdity or illogic: characteristics of cultural others in America.

10. Ho Chi Kuei in Cantonese, the heroine's mother's language, is probably written as 好似鬼, which means one who is very (好) similar (似) to ghosts (鬼).

11. See Sau-ling Cynthia Wong's "Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour?"

12. Her argument is also criticized by Tara Fickle in "American Rules and Chinese Faces: The Games of Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*."

13. Wong's book, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*, addresses a similar issue of the political and the personal in the form of Necessity and Extravagance, but throughout the book she never treats *The Joy Luck Club* in the serious way in which she treats *The Woman Warrior*.

14. Becoming her own mother is Jing-mei's interpretation of this China trip, but the idea originated with the Joy Luck aunties, who "couldn't help but think of some miracle, some possible way of reviving her [Suyuan] from the dead" so that dead Suyuan could see her twin daughters (269).

15. My argument about Mah's affection toward Leon is not to privatize the economic situation of Chinese Americans and mask it with a romantic love story because it is obvious that their relationship is strained by the discriminatory division of labor based on gender and

race (or more precisely, gendered race). For a helpful argument on the racial stratification of labor market that affects Asian Americans, see Chae.

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