

Planting “A Pear Garden in the West”: Recreation of Self, Community and Theater

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1. Introduction

In her two works, The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts (1975) and China Men (1977), Maxine Hong Kingston tried to give significance to the lives of Chinese American people in the past. One of the most important motifs in these narratives was a motif of (re-)changing selves and identities. In the memoirs, from the perspective of an American girl, the narrator sought to clear up the secrets of her mother’s stories buried deeply in Chinese past while changing the images of traditional demure women into powerful heroines as *Fa Mu Lan*. In the men’s stories, the narrator’s interest was in “claiming America” for her ancestors and in transforming the old images of Chinese male immigrants as “coolies” into the heroes and founders of the United States (“Talk” 14). It is, however, impossible for the narrators of the two narratives to listen to the voices of the dead distant far from the present. Therefore, it was mostly through indirect ways such as her mother’s “talk-stories,” various Chinese materials and old myths that the narrators imagined and retold their daily experiences in the context of the American present. In other words, the narratives were about the imaginative struggles by the narrators to (re-)connect the memories of China with the realities of America for their ancestors and their own selves.

The author transfers these tasks into her first novel, Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book (1987).¹ In the fiction, the narrator intends to shift the images and selves of the characters by tying up their daily lives in modern America to history of Chinese ancestors and to various stories of Chinese classical heroes. In the narrative as well, the motif of changing selves, images and identities plays a crucial part. As I will discuss in the next chapters, the whole story is filled with the images of “the King of the Monkeys” from a Chinese classical literature, The Journey to

the West, one of the central models and forerunners for the main character. The Monkey is a symbol of shifting images of selves with his command of seventy-two transformations. In the story on Tripmaster, the characters seek to re-change and re-switch their own selves and their realities incessantly in the process of improvising dramas and theaters. In other words, the process of devising theaters by the characters is also the process of searching for their own selves and identities. In this paper, I will try to argue about how the main character goes through his journey of his inner world to search for his own self; first, about how he struggles for American “identity”; second, about how he seeks for his own “self” with mixed elements, both Chinese, American and others, within himself through developing and realizing the ideas of theater and community; then finally, I will give a conclusion with a reference to some problems left in the narrative.

2. A Journey to Search for an “American” Identity: From a Poet to a Producer

The story is set in California during the era between Beatniks and hippies in the 1960s, when a lot of male adults were drafted into the Vietnam War. It begins with the story of a young poet, Wittman Ah Sing, a fifth generation American of Chinese ancestry, who has an immense sense of solitude and alienation from the whole society around himself and daydreams about suicide by leaping off the Golden Gate Bridge. His despair in his daily lives and the reality is partly because he feels a great distance from Nanci Lee, another Chinese American, one of his former classmates at a university, and a woman of his dreams. It is also partly because he gets fired from his job as a salesclerk at a toy department store and becomes jobless.

Or rather, it is because he can not find out any meaning in his life after he graduated with BA from a university. It is continually echoed in his mind and throughout the narrative. As an undergraduate of English literature, he always wonders how he can apply what he has acquired at a university in his life and in the real world. It accounts for many references in the narrative to arts and stories from canonical literary works and films such as Hamlet, Rilke and West Side Story. It also explains his daydream about creating “a someday tradition” of reading masterpieces by the past American writers, such as Mark Twain and Carlos

Bulosan, in front of listening passengers riding the railroads throughout the West (TM 9). In this sense, the story is about how he struggles to put his knowledge and imaginative ability to practical use in the reality.

His hopelessness, however, is mostly because he feels isolated from the whole world outside himself. It is the sense of loneliness and isolation, however, that he himself demands so as to be an American manhood, whether stereotypical or not. His fixed image of an American is an image of an independent, self-reliant and determined person and he struggles to impose the stable identity upon himself. After being dismissed from his job of selling toy products, he tries to interpret “what is American” stereotypically at the Unemployment Office; “An American stands alone. Alienated, tribeless, individual. To be a successful American, leave your tribe, your caravan, your gang, your partner, your village cousin, your refugee family that you’re making the money for, leave them behind” (TM 246). From his point of view, a typical American must be solid, unitary and lonesome American who faces up to difficulties alone. The image is also reflected in the Hollywood films. With his sense of depress and emptiness after his unemployment, he tries to console himself by watching movies. Seeing West Side Story, he thinks to himself: “White boys don’t need a gang because they own country. They go about the country individually and confidently, and not on the lookout for whom to ally with” (TM 71). The Hollywood story strengthens the image of an independent American in the main character’s mind and furthers his feeling of alienation from the outer world.

Moreover, his first dream of being a poet deepens his solitude. As a poet, he devotes himself solely to writing poems alone in his room. Although he has a chance to read them to Nanci later, he disturbs and scares her by acting his one-man show with no room for others to join in. It is his pride and his eager desire for “American-ness” that are manifested in the scene of his reading poems with high-flown gestures. The strong desire for solitude is also implied in the scene of a party held by his classmates and in the scene of a department store which exposes his inability to adjust himself to a service job. In other words, he is and *will be* solitary to be like a “real” American. The more he has an eager desire for a solid American identity, the more he drives himself into a sense of alienation.

On the contrary, for him, a stereotypical characteristic of a Chinese is of having a strong feeling of being connected to family and community, exactly the opposite of an American image of individuality. The image is reflected in his view of

“Chinese-ness”

at the Unemployment Office; “When you have a moment of idleness, an old Chinese lady will always appear, and give you something to do, keep you from going lazy” (TM 228). He also emphasizes the image in “a typical Chinese American woman” Judy Louis, whom he meets in a bus on their ways to the party. Judy, contrary to Nanci who is an “Americanized” woman, is eager to look for common points between her and Wittman and to develop lively conversation between them while he tries to distance himself from her by pretending to be a Japanese.

Thus, from the viewpoint of Wittman, “what is an American” and “what is a Chinese” are irreconcilable. Here again, a significant question of the author incessantly echoes from the beginning of her first novel through to this narrative:

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 is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?”
(*The Woman Warrior* 5-6)

The narrator of the memoirs were desperate to deny “Chinese-ness” in herself, images about China and stories from China in her girlhood. Likewise, Wittman clearly tends to valorize “American-ness” more highly than “Chinese-ness” and to keep his distance from what reminds him of “China.” In his ideas about ethnicity, one of the most crucial determinants for one’s identity, he is obviously bound by binary opposition in traditional Euro-centered ideas, “the West” versus “the East” or China. With his precedence of “America” over “China,” he tries to overlap his identity with an image of “an American” and to act like a “true” American. Throughout the first half of the fiction, he continually tries to search for a stable identity as an American and struggles to acquire it even if he throws away another ethnic factor within himself. It is his strong wish for an American identity what isolates himself from his own ethnic community.

As a result, Wittman has no idea about where he places himself not only in American society but also in Chinese ethnic community. Due to his way of thinking and his manner, “a true Chinese” will not regard him as a member of their group in narrower senses:

People who have gone to college --- people their age with their attee-tood --- well, there are reasons --- people who wear black turtleneck sweaters *have*

no place. You don’t easily come home, come back to Chinatown, where they give you stink-eye and call you a saang-hsü lo, a whisker-growing man, Beatnick. (TM 10-11, my emphasis)

As if corresponded to the alienation from the side of ethnic community, the main character disregards foreign immigrants from Asia who are newcomers to the New World as outsiders and he manages to distance himself from them. He even feels ashamed of FOB’s (“fresh off the boat”) when he passes them in a dark tunnel:

The whole family taking a cheap outing on their day offu. Immigrants. Fresh Off the Boats out in public....So uncool. F.O.B. fashions --- highwaters or puddlecuffs. Can’t get it right. Uncool. Uncool. The tunnel smelled of mothballs --- F.O.B. perfume. (TM 5)

Since he has taken root in American society as a fifth generation of American, the new immigrants are just foreigners and “the others” outside American society for him.

Moreover, the main character feels no connection to other ethnic groups even inside Asian American society. His former classmate of a Japanese American, *sansei*, Lance Kamiyama, invites him to a party, where Wittman refers to his feeling of alienation compared to Japanese Americans sarcastically: “You A.J.A.s are really good at belonging, you belong to the Lions, the Masons, the V.F.W., the A.M.A., the American Dental Association. That’s why they locked you up, man” (TM 118).

These episodes, on the one hand, are partly because of his childhood when he had grown up as a son of an actor and an actress, often traveling with circus and actors in trailer parks and on the train. This factor distinguishes him from other members of ethnic society who had tried to establish their own community and to take root in it. In other words, he has always been going through changing realities and has had no specific societies or home to belong to.

From another perspective, however, these three scenes reflect the changing reality of ethnic society, contrary to the fixed images of “China” or “Asia” in the main character’s view. For example, what is called Chinese communities are themselves continual shifting spaces of intersection between their members, cultures and languages: From the middle of the nineteenth century to the 1950s, the urban communities in New York and San Francisco had been inhabited mainly by male laborers such as laundrymen, housemen and restaurant workers who mostly came from southern China, Canton Province. On the other hand, recent immigrants

are composed of members with more multiple backgrounds, male as well as female immigrants, workers for service industries as well as professionals and businessmen, from Hong Kong, mainland China and Taiwan as well as from several Asian countries such as Malaysia and Singapore as diasporas.²

In turning our eyes more widely to Asian American societies, they are unstable spaces with incessant changing as well. To use Lisa Lowe's words, they are made up of "heterogeneity," by which she means differences, relationships and conflicts among various determinants such as national origin, generations, gender, class economic backgrounds and so on (67). The conversation between Wittman and Lance shows the differences of origin and experiences among themselves and conflicts inside Asian American societies. To Wittman, who envies Lance's affiliation to the mainstream society, the Japanese American tells his secret life; from his childhood in the internment camp during the period of World War II, a memory of being adopted by white parents after a massacre of his real parents, to his journey to southern islands searching for himself and "roots" of Japanese immigrants in the past. The sense of isolation implied in the memory here suggests double possibilities: One is the difference of their ethnic origins and their experiences between Japanese and Chinese in American history. The story, however, also hints another possibility, a possibility to share their feelings of alienation from the mainstream society through their historical experiences and a possibility to reconcile and partner with each other within Asian American communities.

As we have seen so far, Asian American communities are not an ideal home for the main character to belong and to identify with although they hold a possibility for sympathy within their members as well as conflicts. It is, however, not only his inner desire that makes him isolated from the outer world, both from the Chinese community in the United States and from the mainstream society. The invisible pressure from the outer world forces him into alienation more powerfully. His ideal home, "the Gold Mountain," estranges him from itself. He cannot also help but express his irritation at how the mainstream society has treated him not as its member but as an outsider mostly due to his ethnicity. Although he thinks of himself as an authentic American citizen, he still suffers from how racial prejudices have been prevailing deeply along with their ignorance toward what is called ethnic minorities in the white society. In reading through reviews on his theater, Wittman gives vent to his fury before his audience: "'East meets West.' 'Exotic.' 'Sino-

American theater'[Even Sinophiles] think they know us --- the wide range of us from sweet to sour --- because they eat in Chinese restaurants" (TM 307-308). Here, he senses how the mainstream has neglected and overlooked the people and culture of his ethnicity and how it has distinguished itself from "the Other," or "the Orient," against "the Occident" in a dichotomous theory. Although he himself is trapped in the stereotypical images of "American-ness" against "Chinese-ness" so as to have a fixed identity, he senses that the mainstream society will not regard him its member and isolate him from itself.

To make matters worse, the stronger he wishes for his dreamland, the stronger he feels his isolation from it, and the stronger it is eager to pull him back to his own ethnic home. The motif of a desire for a land of fantasy, "the Gold Mountain," is also described in a story of "Ghostmate" in the author's previous work, China Men. In the short story, a man is pulled back to his reality after he notices that a beautiful woman and a luxurious life he met are only products of his dreams and fantasies. In the stories about Wittman as well, he seeks to dream of an ideal America and to claim it, only to despair of bringing himself up to the illusion. However eagerly he tries to bring himself closer to the ideal home and to deny Chinese image and its heritages within himself, he cannot help but be aware of his ethnicity buried deeply in himself. After his failure at making himself understood to Nanci with his poems, he devotes himself to writing a new story recklessly alone in his room all through the night. It is a tale of Joang Fu, a singer and a storyteller, who travels on a riverboat throughout China singing "The Gold Mountain Song" in the distant past. A voice on the radio, however, suddenly pulls him back to reality and makes him sense his "Chinese-ness" in himself:

He had been tripping out on....[t]he wrong side of the world. What had he to do with foreigners? With F.O.B. émigrés? Fifth-generation native Californian that he was. Great-Great-Grandfather came on the Nootka, as ancestral as the Mayflower....The story boat has got to light out on the Mississippi or among the houseboats on the San Joaquin Delta.... *His province is America. America, his province.* (TM 41, my emphasis)

Thus, the main character, devoid of self, becomes aware of how he has been in "emptiness" throughout in his life (TM 67). He is torn by serious conflicts within himself between his desire for America, its rejection of him, his refusal of Chinese ethnicity and his isolation from its community. The sense of no home makes him feel as if he is always wandering around without any place to belong to. It is,

however, his awareness of a fantasy, a fantasy of a fixed American identity, which enables the main character to set out on a trip for the next realm. The next trip, here, is a trip to search for his own voice and himself, not just his fake image. His awareness of “fiction” of a single, fixed identity leads him into his awareness of self, which is not firm but is (re-)shaped ceaselessly in a long process of recreation. It is not invariable but is changeable under combination of various external factors and situations. Michael M.J. Fischer refers to how ethnicity is established as an element of one’s identity:

[E]thnicity is *something reinvented and reinterpreted* in each generation by each individual...Ethnicity is not something that is simply passed on from generation to generation, taught and learned; it is *something dynamic*... In part, such a process of assuming an ethnic identity is an insistence on *a pluralist, multidimensional, or multifaceted concept of self: one can be many different things*... (195-196, my emphasis)

Just as Fischer implies in the sentences, “a self” is not made out of one singular ground or origin, which is simply transferred from the past. Or rather, it is not only made from various roots in the past but also is made up of one’s own will as well as outward forces. In this sense, “a self” is not limited to the past but is oriented toward the present and the future.

In short, it could be said that, the first part of the stories describes a process through which the main character shifts his way of life and his interest, from in seeking “American” image of individuality to in pursuing a shared place for him to belong to. At the same time, the part consists of stories on his journey through which he switches what he tries to search for, from his desire for a stable “American” identity to changeable self with various elements inside. The self is an image of “the King of the Monkeys.” In this way, Wittman sets out on a next trip to a new world.

3. A Journey to Search for a “Chinese American” Self: From Isolation to Community and Theater

Then, how does the main character seek to search for his own place and self in his life trip? For him, the most significant way is to recreate his *and their* theater. They, here, include not only his friends, acquaintances and audience but also his

family, relatives and descendants of immigrants over the Pacific Ocean with “a Gold Mountain trunk.” Furthermore, they hold a great variety of participants from actors and actresses living daily lives around him, his forefathers filled with dreams of heroes in American wilderness, even to various legendary heroes on horseback. As I will see in this chapter, the main character tries to recreate *their* theater which enable him to traverse different times and spaces. Moreover, the theater themselves are a large community where he attempts to rebuild, not a stable identity, but his flexible self. When he tries to persuade a manager of Benevolent Association to lend him the house as a stage for his theaters, he insists on how theaters can also be “a community,” a home where he as well as others can belong to: “Chinaman freaks. Illegal aliens. Outlaws. Outcasts of America. But *we make our place* --- this one community house for benevolent living. *We make theater, we make community*” (TM 261, my emphasis). In this chapter, I will try to discuss how he endeavors to change his character by listening to multiple voices of immigrants, his ancestors as well as his comrades in the process of remaking theaters.

His first step to recreate his/*their* theater is to trace his origins back to “the Gold Mountain” stories of his ancestors. As many historians point out, Chinese American history begins mostly when the immigrants had sailed across the Pacific Ocean to “the New World” in search for their dreams, new jobs and gold in the middle of the nineteenth century.³ In contrast to those typical immigrants, however, Wittman’s ancestors had immigrated to California to “play” as actors and entertainers: “The difference between us and other pioneers, we did not come here for the gold streets. We came to play. And we’ll play again. Yes, John Chinaman means to enjoy himself all the while” (249-250). His mother, whose stage name is Ruby Long Legs, once a showgirl, playing “Flora Dora girl” and raising money for war bonds during World War II with her sisters. His father, Zeppelin Ah Sing, had also participated in the roadshow as a backstage electrician and as an onstage emcee. Likewise, Wittman derives his character and his talent for playacting from his ancestors. He was born “backstage in vaudeville” and grew up in theaters (13). “They (his parents) kept me in an actual theatrical trunk --- wallpaper lining, greasepaint, and mothball smells, paste smell.... I’m dressed as a monkey. I’m running around in the crowd handing up jars and bottles and taking in the money” (13-14). The dreams of playing in the New World by his ancestors pass into a dream of the main character. Here, his dream is to fill their “theatrical trunk,” or “Gold Mountain trunk,” with poems and play-acts (29).

It could be said that the theme of playacting and theaters is one of the significant motifs when trying to grasp the Chinese American world described in works by the author. It is because, for example, the author also attempts to connect the characters with theater in her first memoirs on women of Chinese Americans. In a finale of “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” for instance, the narrator learns in her mother’s “talk-stories” that her grandmother in China greatly loved the theater. According to the mother, the grandmother did not miss the opportunities whenever the actors visited the village and she brought her household to theaters in spite of a danger of an attacks by bandits: “[T]he entire family was home safe (after the attack), proof to my grandmother that our family was immune to harm as long as they went plays” (*The Woman Warrior* 207). The narrator tells the story not only to dig up her familial history. She also re-tells it to reconnect the tradition of her Chinese ancestors with her present life in the United States by ending up her memoirs with the song open-endedly. Likewise, when he tries to search for his roots and what he is now, it is inevitable for Wittman to trace them back to his ancestral history of plays and theaters. By doing so, he struggles to feel about for the place to locate himself in and to find out a relation between himself and his ancestors.

The significant difference, however, lies between the song by the woman and the story by the man. In the memoirs, the narrator tries to date her origins back to women having lived through their lives not only in the modern American society but also in old China. On the contrary, the main character seeks to tie up what he is at present to his “American” ancestors who had survived in “the Gold Mountain,” not to the mythical “China.” It is partly because he claims America after passing through four generations of his American ancestors while she plays a part of bridging a gap between Chinese mother and herself, an American daughter, as a second generation. Thus, Wittman tries to link his own self to his forefathers and ancestors by shifting their tradition of acting into his dream and his life itself. It means, at the same time, that he seeks to inherit customs and traditions of his folks by realizing their dreams of building theaters.

The fulfillment of reestablishing theaters, however, not only means that the main character manages to reproduce the customs and history on the side of his ancestry. For him, it also implies to recover a long tradition of theaters on the side of Chinese American history. The narrator retells how the custom of theater has been a part of cultural history within Chinese America. According to her, the custom had accompanied the growing number of immigrants from China and had taken root in

the land of America:

The reason he (Wittman) doesn't have right livelihood is that our theater is dead. A company of one hundred great-great-grandparents came over to San Francisco during the Gold Rush, and put on epic kung fu opera and horse shows. Soon the City had six companies --- not those six business companies --- six theater companies --- the Mandarin Theater, the last to die; the Great China Theater, which runs movies now. (TM 249)

This is also one of the motifs in the author's second narratives on male immigrants who set out on adventures for gold. They depict how theaters have been implanted into the new land in the tide of immigration from China and how they have encouraged the men having survived cruel policies and laws against them in American society. The narrator's grandfather, Ah Goong, after working hard to build railroads through the Sierra Nevada Mountains as one of the immigrant laborers, travel in California throughout his life since they were driven out from American labor market. During his severe life in wilderness, he tries to find relief and consolation in plays in Chinatown of Sacramento: "Ah Goong recognized the hero, Guan Goong.... Ah Goong's heart leapt to recognize hero and horse in the wilds of America.... Ah Goong felt as warm as if he was with friends at a party" (China Men 149).

In the accounts of journeys on Wittman as well, the narrator describes how theaters and plays have heartened immigrants and united them from loneliness in a foreign country. Above all, one of the encouraging plays for them was a scene from the narratives of Romance of the Three Kingdoms:

In the peach orchard, they invent a ritual of friendship. The friendship ritual was one thousand six hundred and twenty-nine years old when the Forty-Niners, our great-great-grandfathers, brought it to the Gold Rush. Every matinee or evening for a hundred years, somewhere in America, some acting company was performing The Oath in the Peach Orchard... (TM 141)

As the three episodes show, it is inevitable for the narrators to touch on the historical aspects of theaters in Chinese American society when retelling the lives of Chinese American people and their cultural history. The significant role of theaters is also one of the common points among Chinese American artists, such as between Kingston and a playwright, Frank Chin. In other words, by reproducing theaters, Wittman tries to inherit the continuous tradition of Chinese America as a

part of American customs, and probably, to hand down it to another generation in the future. In this manner, Wittman seeks to re-place his self in unbroken lives of his ancestors. Likewise, it is also an attempt to re-locate his family as well as himself in a larger scale of American history by weaving their personal lives and tracks into the history. It is because the tracks of their lives are also overlapped with the traces of Chinese migration appeared in public American history. Therefore, by reproducing the customs of his ancestors, it becomes possible for Wittman to link them with the long history of theaters in “the Gold Mountain.”

The tradition of theater, however, disappears from the surface of stages in American cultural history. The main character, as well as the author, is aware of the blank in American history. The author attempts to appeal the gap between the periods through his character’s voice. On the first night of his public performance by “The Pear Garden Players of America,” Wittman gives an address that theaters nearly broke off in American tradition: “For a century, every night somewhere in America, we had had a show. But our theater went dark” (TM 277).⁴ The author also points out the cultural situation. During the period between the Beatniks and Hippies, according to the author, “[t]he new artistic wave hadn’t come. There’s a dark period in theater that coincides with a dark period in Chinese American theater. There’s something missing. I could sense it,... I’ve got to plug it in” (“Writing” 101). It is in the blank period, however, that both of the author and the narrator try to intervene and to fill with the characters’ imaginations and their lives. Like the girl who re-imagines a secret tale of her aunt, like the woman who re-tells a hidden stories of her father in silence, the narrator here manages to depict the possibilities under the void and to recover the period full of stories and adventures through Wittman.

In this way, by overlapping his dream with those of immigrants in the past, the main character tries to re-place his self in a larger scale of (Chinese) American history as well as in his ancestral history. It is in his attempt to link Chinese past with American history that he also performs a journey to search for his grandmother, “PoPo,” simultaneously. It is because, for one thing, for the grandson, she symbolizes a person with unstable origins in that she speaks Japanese, Chinese and English and he is not sure whether she is really his grandmother or not. She just became his “PoPo” after his family took in the poor woman, gave her food and home. For another thing, his grandmother is an image of old China or inscrutable past, for his parents, who are pursuing an American dream and are willing to deny

Chinese past. Therefore, they left her in the mountains now. For the grandson, however, she is a blank of the past, a gap of an origin which has a possibility to link America and China with each other. In this manner, the main character tries to seek his grandmother at the same time that he manages to re-locate himself in American present and history.

It is, however, not only to inherit the dreams of his family that enables him to reestablish his selves. By listening to and re-producing heroic stories and legends, he also tries to re-change his selves. It is because the traditional tales have not only been born in China but also out of American society since the immigrants have brought them with themselves to and have implanted them in the land of "the Gold Mountain." In his life and theater, the tales Wittman replays and overlaps his life with are mainly from three Chinese classics; The Journey to the West, The Water Verge, or Outlaws of the Marsh, and Romance of the Three Kingdoms.

Above all, one of the most significant models for him is "the King of the Monkeys" in The Journey to the West as he calls himself "the present-day U.S.A. incarnation of the King of the Monkeys" (33). We can also see the importance given to the role of the Monkey by the author from the title of the fiction. The role of the Monkey plays a central part throughout the narrative. It is mainly because the Monkey is a symbol of continual changing selves. The main character tries to overlap himself with the image of the Monkey. Besides the Monkey, a model he seeks to re-connect by playing is Kuan Yu, or Gwang Goong, a hero of the Three Kingdoms, a man with multiple identities as "[t]he god of actors and writers and warriors and gamblers and travelers" (255). With his command of seventy-two transformations, the Monkey stands up to and challenges difficulties, monsters and authorities during his trip to India with a sophisticated priest for the Buddhist Scriptures. By overlapping himself with the Monkey, Wittman tries to re-change and re-create his own self ceaselessly not only in his dramas but also in his real life. The ability of changing, however, not only enables him to re-make himself. The motif of changing selves also allows him to let various characters, from heroes in the classic tales to Chinese immigrants having crossed the Pacific Ocean in the past, join the theaters and a community over times and spaces. It is because the master of transformation, the Monkey, can live through thousands of lives and ages by shifting himself into another lives. Moreover, Whittman tries to assemble and re-unite every characters and legendary heroes from different times and different places on a same stage, by switching scenes in their drama one after another, such

as from the world of the Monkey to the warlike world of three kingdoms.

Thus, Wittman attempts to interweave the lives and voices of his ancestors, immigrants and even classic heroes into his own self and his theater, and to re-make them into *their theaters*. As Charles Bogard Shaw, an Euro-American, one of Wittman's classmates and a model of a "tripmaster" or a guide for him, draws a conclusion from the narrative of The Saragosa Manuscript, a person can transcend a boundary between him/her and others and can connect themselves by entering others' stories. The idea also implies that one can (re-)experience the lives of others as a part of one's own life. The Charles's idea can be also linked to the idea of multiple selves within oneself by Trinh T. Minh-ha. In a poetic way, Trinh points out infinity of selves which has a possibility of breaking the traditional Western notion of "pure origin" and "true self":

I/i can be I or I, you and me both involved... "I" is...not a unified subject, a fixed identity, or that solid mass covered with layers of superficialities one has gradually to peel off before one can see its true face. "I" is, itself, *infinite layers*.... Whether I accept it or not, the natures of I, I, you, s/he, We, we, they, and wo/man constantly overlap. (90-94, original emphasis)

The Charles's thought echoes through the theaters Wittman seeks to re-create and also through the self he seeks to re-build. With the guide of Charles, Wittman has a significant concept which leads to the ideal of developing community: "Here we are, miraculously on Earth at the same moment, walking in and out of one another's lifestories, no problems of double exposure, *no difficulties crossing the frame*. Life is ultimately fun and doesn't repeat and doesn't end" (TM 103, my emphasis). In this manner, he seeks to reconnect a great variety of heroes, heroines and himself with each other by letting them into their same stages and by re-acting their lives. It is in the crossover among them that *their stages*, or *their theaters*, become *their community*.

By re-acting the lives of three heroes from the scene of "The Peach Garden Oath" from Romance of the Three Kingdoms, Wittman not only tries to give lives and voices to the legendary heroes. He also seeks to re-build his and their own community through the scene. It is because the central theme of the oath is friendship and community. As is well known, the romance is grounded in stories about real people and historical events in China during the period of three divided countries in the third century.⁵ The stories were originally handed down from people to people orally over hundreds of years, and later, they were retold and

rewritten by Lo Kuan Chung as a romance in the fourteenth century. In the era of the later Han Dynasty, corrupt practices were common among government officials, and the country fell into chaos and disorder. The novel begins with the calling by the emperor of the Han for warriors to unite against their common enemies and to save China. An heir to the throne of the Han and a sandal maker, *Liu Pei*, worries about the future of the country very much, seeing the draft paper from the emperor. Then, he meets other two men, *Chang Fei* and *Kuan Yu*, who later pledge constant brotherhood and friendship with *Liu Pei* in a peach garden.

Here, the re-play of the scene of the oath has twofold significance for Wittman. One is that he re-acts a life of the hero, *Kuan Yu*, in the scene to show the meanings behind the oath, which is to have a strong relationship and to build community as themes. The other is that he tries to rebuild theaters and community across the border of races by calling many actors and actresses from different ethnic backgrounds into his stage. One of the most symbolic scenes is one in the peach garden, where Lance, a Japanese American, plays the part of *Liu Pei* and Charles Bogard Shaw, an Euro-American, plays *Chang Fei*. By letting them join the stage, Wittman tries to re-establish a community which, not excludes, but includes people from any ethnic group. In the scene, the three actors make a vow to fight for their common goal and to beat their common enemies until they die: “They learn that one’s cause is the other’s cause” (TM 141). In addition, ideal theaters for Wittman are ones of including every actor, actress and audience irrespective of their sex, age as well as race: “[T]he actors can be any race....a different color. I’m including everything that is being left out, and everybody who has no place....we also integrate theater and parties” (52). He lets a great variety of characters, from his family to his friends, regardless of ethnic backgrounds, join the process of building a community while letting them have their own parts in the community. Thus, he attempts to break up the boundary of race through the scene of “The Peach Garden Oath.”

Another story the actors re-play is a story of marriage between *Liu Pei* and *Lady Sun* in the Romance. In the scene on another form of bond, Wittman also tries to describe his ideal theater and community of forming a union free from racial restriction. The episode is known as a tale of *Sun Ch’üan*’s three tactics.⁶ According to Yan, in the original story, a theme of marriage is used as a military plot. *Sun Ch’üan* tries to lure *Liu Pei* into his home with his fake offer to exchange marriage vows between *Liu Pei* and his younger sister, *Lady Sun*. *Sun Ch’üan*,

here, actually conspires to capture him and to rob him of his land. Knowing the plot, *Sun Ch'üan*'s mother gets angry with her son because that makes her daughter a widow. Then, the mother meets *Liu Pei* and becomes pleased with his personality. She allows him to get married to her daughter and prevents her son's ambush. After his failure in the capture of *Liu Pei*, *Sun Ch'üan* tries to isolate him from his allies. With a plot to attack his brothers and comrades in his mind, *Sun Ch'üan* provides *Liu Pei* with a palace for his honeymoon and tries to make him lose himself in luxurious life. *Liu Pei*, however, senses the plan, and escapes from the palace at midnight with *Lady Sun*. As a result, *Sun Ch'üan* fails both in the plot of marriage as well as in the plot of fights.

Wittman changes the story of political tactics into a romance of marriage across the boundary of races. In the scene, he performs the part of *Liu Pei* while his wife, Taña De Weese, performs *Lady Sun*. Wittman gets married to Taña, a Caucasian, two days after they met at the party held by Lance. Taña's ideal for pacifism partly lets him make up his mind to marry her: "I'd be glad to save you from the draft (into the army for the Vietnam War), Wittman" (TM 163). By revising the original story of politics into a romance of interracial marriage, he tries to adjust it into his real life while re-experiencing the other's life and weaving it into his own self. Their romance is transformed flexibly into another version:

Years go by.... kingdoms rise and fall. *Lady Sun*, a beautiful princess with red hair and blue eyes, has beaten all of her father's and brother's knights.... She wants to try combat in a real war. News reaches her that *Liu Pei*'s two wives had been killed. She could marry the famous old warrior, and be his partner, martial and marital. She sends him a proposal.... To answer her, he sets off with a fleet of ten fast ships across the Yangtze to the southern kingdom of *Wu*, where Americans come from.... *Liu Pei* meets the gold-haired family.... You've furnished your rooms with spears... and your ladies-in-waiting are an amazon army. 'Is this the ambush then?' I ask. (172)

As the passage of a new version shows, *Lady Sun* is not a classical Chinese woman but a princess "with red hair and blue eyes" from a "gold-haired family." It implies the present relationship between Wittman and Taña. In his made-up story, it is *Lady Sun*, not an obedient and demure woman, who proposes a marriage to her partner. In their real lives, it is also Taña who suggests a marriage to Wittman. Moreover, by setting out on a trip to the kingdom of "*Wu*, where Americans come from,"

Wittman/*Liu Pei* implies his interracial marriage with Taña. The different version of the original also shows his stance that he is an American at the same time that he has multiple elements including Chinese heritages within himself just as Wittman/*Liu Pei* sails through the Chinese river to the kingdom of “Wu, where Americans come from.” It implies that America is the hometown for himself at the same time that he can trace one of his roots back to China.

As we have seen in the scene of the Peach Garden and in the revised version of romance of the couple, the participants try to envision and perform the ideal community and partnership across the border of races in their dramas. There is, however, another significant idea behind the romance, which is an idea of pacifism. The stage is at first sprung from the world of chaos where the King of the Monkeys lives. Then, it is switched over to the realm of disorder where three heroes bond together to fight against enemies. The actors and actresses re-experience the lives and adventures of those various heroes, ladies and characters while re-changing and re-shifting their own selves incessantly through their dramas. Finally, Wittman, a playwright and also an actor, transforms himself to another person with various characters interwoven inside his own self. In the process of transition from the story of unity between men to the romance of a hero and a princess, he himself turns into another man with complexities inside himself. At the outset, Wittman/*Gwang Goong* was shouting loudly, “There’s a war on. It comes this way, we have to take part. You can’t stand aside and let your people be slaughtered. You have to be realistic” (142) and he was willing to fight for his companions after the oath in the peach garden. He, however, gradually senses a re-change of his personality from a hawk to a dove through the tale of wedding.

Pacifism forms the basis of Wittman’s ideal community. In the scene of battle from the three kingdoms, Lance/*Liu Pei*, a pacifist, objects to Wittman/*Gwang Goong*, a militant:

Always invite your enemies to parties.... We’ll take on their ways, and slow them down, unable to distinguish themselves from us.... Our foreign policy will be: We want to marry you. Propose to every nation.... Wherever we find a sit-in, we’ll sit. A salt march along the coast? We’ll march. A spinning wheel, we’ll spin.... (143-144)

The antiwar idea by Lance/*Liu Pei* is gradually melted into Wittman/*Gwang Goong* so that the main character here can be Wittman/*Gwang Goong*/Lance/*Liu Pei*. Through the plays, the main character cherishes a dream of sharing a same goal; a

goal of not to fight violently, but to fight against war and to be a pacifist.

The positive strategy, a strategy of fighting for peace, is also what makes the author stand out in the realm of Asian American literature. It is because, as several critics such as Cheung points out, there have been a deep-rooted disputes over the authenticity of their culture and literature among Asian American artists and critics.⁷ One of the most critical persons is Frank Chin, who accuses her of distorting “real” Chinese culture and literature throughout her works. It is true that they are common in retelling myths and legends originated from China, as an heir to their cultures, but they are different in how to grapple with them. For example, Chin is eager to retell the stories of Chinese classics, such as Romance of the Three Kingdoms, in his works, where he attempts to search for Chinese American manhood or masculinity through heroes with emphasized images of violent warriors. On the contrary, Kingston seeks to reinterpret as well as retell many classical stories and re-changes them according to the conditions and imaginations of the time. As we have seen in the chapter, the author lets her characters re-act the heroes from the romance full of war stories but also enables them re-change the images of the warriors into pacifists through the visions and voices living in American daily lives and reality.

One more significance, however, is added in the anti-war tactics. Wittman and other characters not only try to insist on a pacifist ideal and dream in their plays. They, or the author herself through their voices, also attempt to reflect and have an effect on the real world. Although the stories are about the era of the Vietnam War, they are not set in a battlefield of Vietnam and the characters do not always touch the war directly living inside American society far from Vietnam. The characters, however, seek to fight against war, or more specifically, the Vietnam War, through their real lives and their dramas. Their strategy of pacifism is to have parties and to have marriages while staging “a fake war, which might very well be displacing some real war” (306). During their rehearsal, Wittman tries to shift the garden of peach, where three heroes pledged allegiance to each other, into a place for a barbecue party: “No guns. No bombs. I’m using my deepest brains to ban bombs, and to help you plan the barbecue in the orchard.... You’ve got enough meat and wine to feed everybody” (143). Lance/Liu Pei furthers Wittman’s voice for peace saying that “[f]or the finale, we’ll have a multitudinous wedding” and practicing it actually as “a Kennedy husband” by evading the draft into the American army as a result of his marriage with Sunny (143-144). In the finale, their theater comes to an

end with a wedding ceremony for Wittman and Taña. In the narrative, *their theaters* can be *their parties* and also *their community*.

In this way, Wittman finally could reach for a clue of his place and his own self in his community. For him, the main principle of an ideal community changes in the process of re-creating theaters. It was a connection by uniting its members for a common goal and against a common enemy at the beginning. Now, it is turned into a relationship with mutual bond and mutual reconciliation, which can include every race, every sex and every dream. It is also a place for every member to re-build for themselves, not a place for a person. In other words, it is full of possibilities to be (re-)changed incessantly according to its members, their dreams and their demands:

[Wittman] was defining a community, which will meet every night for a season. *Community is not built once-and-for-all; people have to imagine, practice, and re-create it.* His community surrounding him, then, we’re going to reward and bless Wittman with our listening while he talks to his heart’s content. Let him get it all out, and we hear what he has to say direct. (306, my emphasis).

The idea of re-produced community ceaselessly is also linked with the improvisation of their stories in their dramas. The actors and actresses re-produce their stories and plays out of a basic story like a jazz music so that their theater and community are also reborn without their ends. Wittman changes his own self in his and their community which are not completely established but reshaped through times as theaters, scenes and stories are improvised and made changeably. Through re-acting the mightiest war epic of all time, Wittman “changed --- been! --- into a pacifist” (340).

4. Conclusion

As we have seen in the previous chapters, the narrative is about Wittman’s journey, both inward and outward, to feel for his own self and voice. In the process of searching for himself, the main character tries to listen to the voices of a great variety of people, from actors, actresses, his friends, his classmates, through immigrants, his family, his ancestors, to legendary heroes and heroines buried in classical literature, over times and spaces. The process of interweaving their voices

in his and their theaters not only makes it possible for him to infuse them with lives. Going through the process, he can also weave *their* lives into his own self and re-form himself incessantly. He can sometimes be Wittman and sometimes be Wittman/*Gwang Goong*/Lance/*Liu Pei*. The self re-made up in the process is not a fixed and a singular “identity,” but an unstable and changeable self filled with various elements and conflicts within itself. In addition, the self here is not made of just a unitary origin inherited from the past, but it passes through re-change over and over again since it is rebuilt not only within itself but also in the outward world. In the story of his trip, it is impossible for Wittman to establish his identity only by himself as an isolated man. It is only in a larger space of community outside himself that he can advance the ceaseless work of rebuilding his own self.

In this manner, the process of rebuilding *their* theater is also the process of recreating *their* community, and also the process of reshaping one’s own self for Wittman. Thus, *their* theater/*their* community becomes a place for him to belong to. In this way, Wittman tries to be a new Chinese American. He is not only a Chinese but also an American with Chinese elements and heritages within himself just as he seeks to re-read and re-play the stories of epic classics according to his present life in modern America. In this sense, just as Yan Gao points out relevantly, compared with the Monkey King’s tale which is about a journey “to the West,” Wittman’s story is about a journey “in the West” or in America (141). Likewise, his stories of “a Pear Garden” is not a story “to the West” but a story inside America.

There is, however, one more task left for Wittman. Now, he found out a path to Asian American consciousness. The next step for him is to be “a global citizen” by turning his gaze outward (Seshachari 212). For the purpose, the main character will have to go through more and more journeys to search for and re-change his own self incessantly through recreating both his/*their* theaters and his/*their* community.

Notes

- ¹ Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book won the P.E.N. USA West Award in fiction in 1989. The author derives the word “tripmaster” from the slang in the 1960’s, when people were inventing new words to describe “psychedelic states” and “new vision” (“Talking” 78). In the 1960’s, “people could be on acid, and there’s a tripmaster who suggests trips for them and who guides them and keeps them from flipping out....as for “Monkey,” it’s utterly clear to me that the monkey spirit (the spirit of Monkey King as a trickster and a revolutionist against authorities from a Chinese classic, The Journey to the West) came to America in the 1960’s. Monkey was at the Democratic

Convention in Chicago, abandon the march to the Pentagon. It's the most interesting coincidence that Monkey accompanied Tripitaka to India... Tripitaka and Tripmaster begin in the same T-R-I-P" ("Creating" 204). As for a "fake book," it is a jazz term "describing a book of melodies with... only a hint at what the accompaniment should be" so that they would improvise further from the basic tunes ("Maxine" 170). See also an interview with Blauvelt in "Talking," 1989.

All subsequent references to the novel are indicated in the text by the abbreviation "TM" and parenthetical numbers.

- ² Lowe describes the fluctuation in Asian American society (65-66). As for the society and community, also see Cheung, 1997 and Murakami, 1997.
- ³ See Takaki, 1989 and 1993.
- ⁴ The main character names his theater company "The Pear Garden Players of America." According to him, "[t]he Pear Garden was the cradle of civilization, where theater began on Earth. Out among the trees, ordinary people made fools of themselves acting like kings and queens" (TM 52). His dream is to plant and grow it in the land of America.
- ⁵ See Chin, 1991.
- ⁶ See Yan, 1996.
- ⁷ See Cheung, 1990, and an interview with Perry in "Maxine," 1993.

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