

2017

## Immigration, Ethnicity, and Citizenship: The Words and Faces of the Chinese of North America

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IMMIGRATION, ETHNICITY, AND CITIZENSHIP: THE WORDS AND FACES  
OF THE CHINESE OF NORTH AMERICA

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Interdepartmental PhD Program of Comparative Literature

by

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May 2017



## **Acknowledgments**

It is a pleasure to thank all my dissertation committee members, Professor William Boelhower, Professor Adelaide Russo, Professor Qiancheng Li, Professor Sunny Yang, and Professor Fahui Wang as the Dean's Representative. Without their guidance, wisdom, encouragement, and patience, I could never have achieved this. There are no words that can adequately express my deepest appreciation for Professor William Boelhower. You have been exceedingly supportive and encouraging since the first day I sat in your class and throughout my dissertation writing process. I will never forget the intellectual lunches we had that gave birth to the outline of my dissertation. I will cherish the books and DVDs that you gave me as gifts for my dissertation research! I also owe you a deep debt of gratitude for your meticulous corrections and editing of my dissertation, which have helped greatly to improve my English proficiency.

I would like to give my special thanks to Professor Adelaide Russo for admitting me into the program of Comparative Literature at LSU. You have been helping me in every way possible throughout the five years I studied here. Under your guidance, I decided my research direction, chose committee members, passed the general exam, and eventually completed my dissertation. You have also provided me with all kinds of teaching opportunities, which I am sure will benefit me during the rest of my life.

I also wish to thank Professor Qiancheng Li for your support on everything! I was so enlightened by your advice on teaching Chinese and on the professional job market. I sincerely appreciate your generosity and lunch! It was from that lunch that you introduced me to Professor Sunny Yang, another excellent member of my committee. Professor Sunny Yang, although you joined my committee a little late, you have contributed equally to the completion of my dissertation. Your insightful suggestions on theories, historical context, and textual analysis highlighted the parts that needed improvement. Whenever I encountered a problem, you were always available.

At last, I would love to thank my parents for everything.

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## **Abstract**

In this dissertation, I have analyzed the migrant experience of Chinese immigrants in North America through their representation in literature and photography. Each of its three chapters focuses on three major ethnic issues affecting the lives and identity of Chinese immigrants and their offspring in North America: the first concerns the ways in which occupation, home, and family affect the destinies of Chinese immigrants; the second deals with the role of language in the lives of Chinese immigrants and the career of Chinese migrant writers; the third addresses stereotypes about Chinese immigrants and their offspring and the redefinition of their identity. In this interdisciplinary study, literature inspires us to picture verbally Chinese immigrants' struggles under the discriminatory laws and prejudices of society, and their search for respect and equal rights. As for the medium of photography, it provides ample visual evidence that reinforces and complements the literary representations of them.

I have chosen to study the literary works by Frank Chin, Maxine Hong Kingston, Qiu Xiaolong, Ha Jin, Fae Myenne Ng, David Henry Hwang, Li-Young Lee, Wayson Choy, and Ying Chen. All of them are pivotal figures and explorers of contemporary Chinese ethnic literature in the United States and Canada. Their work offers a multifaceted history of the Chinese immigrants in North America from the late nineteenth century to the present. Along with the study of Chinese American photographers, Mary Tape, Benjamin Chinn, Corky Lee, and Wing Young Huie, I have added a discussion of the work of two American photographers, Arnold Genthe and George Grantham Bain. The contrasting views that emerge help to illuminate the processes of stereotyping as well as identity construction. The work of the Americans focuses on the immigrants' "Chineseness", while that of the Chinese Americans seeks to present Chinese immigrant life and the fight for equality from within the Chinese American community. My discussion of the work of these writers and photographers will bring further attention to the difficulties and the challenges facing the Chinese ethnic group in North America.

## Chapter 1. Introduction

This dissertation is a comparative study of literary and photographic texts dealing with three major issues that beset the experience of Chinese immigrants in North America and their American-born children: first, the ways in which different backgrounds affect the biographical destinies of Chinese Americans; second, the role of language in and beyond the Chinese American community; third, the construction and destruction of stereotypical images of Chinese American immigrants and their descendants. These issues are consecutively addressed in the chapters of this dissertation.

Before I discuss these issues, I would like to introduce and clarify the term “Chinese American immigrants”. First, I use the term to refer to the people who were born in China, have Chinese ancestries and now live in North America. This collective subject also includes those who were born in America but have ancestors, parents or grandparents who were born in China. Second, I have opted for the current hyphenless usage “Chinese American” instead of “Chinese-American”. A few decades ago, scholars used the latter term to refer to the people of Chinese ancestry living in America. But the hyphen is now perceived to imply a marginalization or ghettoization of this group — as if it delineated a partially alien or “unassimilated” people, the so-called hyphenated group. In her essay “Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers”, Maxine Hong Kingston remarks, “We ought to leave out the hyphen in ‘Chinese-American,’ because the hyphen gives the word on either side equal weight, as if linking two nouns. It looks as if a Chinese-American has double citizenship, which is impossible in today’s world. Without the hyphen, ‘Chinese’ is an adjective and ‘American’ a noun; a Chinese American is a type of American” (60). In other words, the hyphen on the one hand assumes a double identity of this group. And on the other hand, it alienates this group from other Americans. Thus, I agree with Kingston’s interpretation of “Chinese American” as “a type of American”, which coexists with “African American”, “European American”, and many other types of unhyphenated Americans. In addition, the once dominant metaphor of the American melting pot



has now given way to something closer to a cultural mosaic or salad bowl. Over the past decades, the notion of citizenship has become much more flexible.

Third, I have chosen to distinguish between the word “immigrant” and “migrant” to better calibrate the shifting subject-status of “Chinese American”. “Migrant” refers to someone who moves or migrates to a new place without any intention of applying for citizenship in the host country. Currently, it is often used as an adjective, for example when we speak of “migrant” workers. Migrants are often seasonal workers who move about geographically to harvest crops, and after a few months of intense labor, they return home. In the second half of the nineteenth century, for example, Chinese migrants were brought in to the United States to work on building the railroads, but they were not perceived or were not allowed the rights of American citizenship. The word “immigrant” is a noun that refers to those who come to a foreign country and intend to live there permanently. For the most part, this term corresponds to the subjects that I study in this dissertation. Scholars also frequently use another word to refer to Chinese American immigrants: “diaspora”. However, the term “diaspora” does not completely fit the various social formations that I focus on here. In *Migrant Sites: America, Place, and Diaspora Literatures*, Dalia Kandiyoti uses “diaspora” to refer to “either the ‘immigrant’ first arrival or the subsequent generations” (9). From this perspective, her understanding of “diaspora” clarifies the “immigrant” in my dissertation. However, she also emphasizes another aspect of “diaspora” that is not shared by all immigrants. This is the “groups’ dispersal from prior places outside the United States” and “their re-gathering in the United States in the first and subsequent generations” (9). Diasporic peoples usually have already travelled or wandered in many places after leaving their home nation and before entering America. What is more, they tend to congregate and build their own communities in America. But many Chinese American immigrants arrived in America directly from China. Although they established Chinatowns in America, there are still a large number of them living outside their ethnic

communities. Thus, only the term “Chinese American immigrants” can fully describe and embrace the subject that I study in this dissertation.

I will now return to the elaboration of the three major issues discussed in this dissertation. First, different occupational, familial, and ancestral backgrounds greatly influence each Chinese American immigrant's life path. There is a significant amount of scholarship on Chinese American immigrants that considers the whole ethnic group as one homogeneous unit, without internal distinctions (Jay 312); and Chinese immigrants are often discussed in the supposedly comprehensive category of “Asian Americans”. For example, in his book *Multicultural Geographies: The Changing Racial/Ethnic Patterns of the United States*, John W. Frazier writes about the past and present of Chinese immigrants as one ethnic group along with other ethnic groups from Asia. However, if we take a closer look, it will not be difficult to identify the various background distinctions among the so-called Chinese ethnic group: first or second generation, born in or outside Chinatown, laborers or intellectuals, exiles or immigrants who invest a huge sums of money in their adopted in exchange for citizenship. In both works of literary and photographic, the major genres analyzed here, we notice that an immigrant’s background significantly affects his or her choice of education, occupation, and lifestyle. Therefore, the first issue to be addressed in this dissertation is how different backgrounds influence the life path of Chinese American immigrants.

Second, language plays an essential role in Chinese American immigrants’ lives. Numerous literary works and scholarly studies discuss the difficulties of learning and speaking English among the Chinese immigrants. Above all, the role and importance of language are never static. For first generation immigrants, their inability to speak English contributed to their social and cultural isolation. But their children, the second generation, grow up in a mixed linguistic environment made up of English and Chinese/Cantonese. Those of the second generation are often confused about which language they could claim as their own and which should be spoken in what circumstances. For migrant writers, language can be an obstacle to success, but it can also be an

artistic and creative advantage. Not only in Chinese American literature but also in photography, we can discern various roles played by language. Thus, the second topic that I explore is the role of language in Chinese American immigrants' lives.

Third, in both literary texts and photographs about and by Chinese American writers and photographers, we see a strong reaction to stereotypical depictions of Chinese American immigrants that can be found in mainstream American culture and media. In previous studies such as Haiming Liu's essay "The Social Origins of Early Chinese Immigrants: A Revisionist Perspectives" and Xinyang Wang's *Surviving the City: The Chinese Immigrant Experience in New York City, 1890-1970*, attention has been given to several kinds of stereotypes, such as the feminization of the Chinese male, his supposed deviousness, and as a perennial source of cheap labor. Such studies tend to focus on merely exposing the stereotypes rather than on deconstructing them. This is the third major issue that I address: how do Chinese American immigrants and their American-born children confront stereotypes? This confrontation also involves them in a necessary process of redefining Chinese American identity.

To explore the three major issues mentioned above, the corpus of this dissertation includes literary works written by Chinese migrant and Chinese American writers who were born in the 1940s and 1950s, and a number of collections of photographs about Chinese American immigrants' lives.

Like other immigrant groups, Chinese American immigrants have a long and painful record in American history. It can be traced back to the first three Chinese seamen and thirty-two Indian sailors whose ship landed in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1785 (Dong 7). Since then, Chinese American immigrants started to recount their lives in stories and images. For example, their rich literary and cultural tradition can be traced in the friendship albums of the early 19th century. The creators of these albums were among the first wave of Chinese students who studied in America. They created or copied "a mix of drawings, poems, and short prose composition[s]" and gave them to friends as a

gift (Sánchez-Eppler 1-2). However, the circulation of these literary and visual texts was limited to the sphere of schools, churches, and small communities where these Chinese students lived. One of the most famous friendship albums was produced by “a Chinese student at the Foreign Mission School in Cornwall, Connecticut” in 1824 (Sánchez-Eppler 1). After them, more Chinese American immigrants began to take up pen and even camera to record their lives.

The first major flowering of Chinese American literature in comes from those who were born in the 1940s and 1950s: Frank Chin (b.1940), Maxine Hong Kingston (b.1940), Qiu Xiaolong (b. 1953), Ha Jin (b.1956), Fae Myenne Ng (b.1957), David Henry Hwang (b.1957), and Li-Young Lee (b.1957). Ever since Frank Chin published the groundbreaking *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* in 1974, Chinese American writers have been attracting their share of mainstream attention, both in the American academy and among the nation’s major publishers. Coming from different backgrounds, these writers — using the media of poetry, drama, memoir, and fiction — focus intensely on the various stages of adjustment through which the different types of Chinese immigrants and their families passed and the kinds of experiences that characterized this process. In order to develop a comparative understanding of the Chinese American immigrant and ethnic experience, I will also incorporate the works of two Chinese Canadian writers: Wayson Choy, a novelist and memoir writer born in Vancouver in 1939 who writes in English, and Ying Chen, a French-speaking novelist born in 1961 in Shanghai. I will pursue the three major issues outlined above in the literary production of these writers as well.

Along with the above writers, this dissertation also incorporates the works of a number of photographers who photograph Chinese American immigrants. Photography differs from literature above all in the way it handles temporality and scene. Photographers are only able to record images at the moment when they press the shutter, while writers are able to write about any historical period by treating duration in multiple ways, such as summary, scene, ellipsis, and pause. In order to have a relatively comprehensive appreciation of Chinese Americans (both immigrants and

ethnics) in the medium of visual history, the photographers treated in my dissertation do not limit themselves to a particular period. In fact, the time when Chinese American immigrants had contact with cameras and photography can be dated back to the 1860s. According to Peter Palmquist, “as poorly paid assistants who lent able hands in commercial studios that popped up in the boomtown businesses that followed the gold rush”, some Chinese laborers learned photographic skills and “set up shop themselves—with one ‘Ka Chau’ credited as the first Chinese to open a daguerreian gallery in San Francisco” (Phu, *Picturing* 40). However, these early photographers’ works were limited to studio portraits and their influence was not recognized or appreciated by the American society at large, especially compared to the American photographers who took street photographs of Chinese American immigrants, such as Carleton Watkins, Charles C. Zoller, George Grantham Bain, and Arnold Genthe. For this reason, my dissertation also includes photographers who are not Chinese American. What is more, these American photographers differ with Chinese American photographers in important ways: purpose, target, cultural representation, attitude, and so forth. A comparison of their works will contribute to a better understanding of the three major issues that I intend to explore in this dissertation. In order to cover a broad time span and compare American and Chinese immigrant photographers’ different perspectives, I will focus on work from the following photographers: Mary Tape (1857-1934), George Grantham Bain (1865-1944), Arnold Genthe (1889-1942), Benjamin Chinn (1921-2009), Corky Lee (1948-), and Wing Young Huie (1955-). Their photographs cover the lives and images of Chinese Americans, especially as these are related to their specific neighborhood sites — especially the Chinatowns in North America from the 1890s to the present.

Since this dissertation is an interdisciplinary and comparative study about the representation of Chinese American and Chinese Canadian immigrants in literature and photography, the synergy between these two mediums is based on three major theoretical insights. First, photography and literature are both ways of recording history. Second, literature and photography both try to capture

an authentic representation of reality, according to the individual artist's point of view. Third, both photographs and prose narratives provide a form of discourse for Chinese American immigrants to reclaim their rights and redefine their identity. To further elaborate how these three aspects help consolidate the interdisciplinary and comparative study of Chinese American and Chinese Canadian literature and photography, it will be helpful to mention a number of relevant works in the theory of literature and photography.

Photographers and writers used camera and pen to record and retell the lives of Chinese American immigrants. Thanks to their works, we now have a rich archive of the history of Chinese American immigrants. In *Cultures of Emancipation: Photography, Race, and Modern American Literature*, Julia Faisst argues that "it was not the camera that chose the picture but the person who wielded it, and photography came to be regarded not only as a form of control over the machine, but also as a kind of writing" (21). Explaining the etymology of "photography" as "light-writing", Faisst goes on to emphasize the photographer's subjectivity, which includes the power to select and record whatever moment or scene of history she wants to capture. In Faisst's opinion, "pictures are what creates history, as well as witnesses to this history" (42). As for writers, they too choose and write about what interests them. The Chinese ethnic writers included in this dissertation obviously felt the need to write about the neglected experience of their people and families.

For example, in his short story collection *A Good Fall*, Ha Jin has compiled his own archive of this newly thriving Chinese American community in Flushing, New York. If he did not write these stories, the Chinese American immigrants there, especially those disadvantaged immigrants such as prostitutes, waitresses, street food vendors, and illegal immigrants, would have a smaller chance to have their stories told to a larger audience. Similarly, Wing Young Huie's photographs about Chinese Americans in St. Paul, Minnesota, and other parts of North America reflect his efforts to contribute to a history of contemporary Chinese American immigrants. Thanks to Huie, their

images and stories can now be consulted in libraries and museums. In addition, they have become an acknowledged part of American history.

Photography and literature are also quite distinct from each other and complement each other in significant ways. According to John Berger, “[P]hotographs supply information without having a language of their own. Photographs do not translate from appearances. They quote from them” (96). Unlike written or spoken language, photographs do not always reveal the photographer’s ideas. What is shown in a photograph is only a small portion of the scene or object at the moment when it was captured. What we see in a photograph is a quotation of the appearance of existence. However, this is not to say that photography does not record. As Berger argues, the “appearances themselves constitute a language” (111). He continues, “at the first degree” appearances cohere “because of common laws of structure and growth which establish visual affinities” (Berger 112).

There are natural connections within the appearances that make appearances speak. Berger goes on to say that “appearances also cohere within the mind as perceptions. The sight of any single thing or event entrains the sight of other things and events” (113). That is to say, an appearance is not perceived and processed individually within our mind. We cannot help relating that appearance to other appearances in our memory. The connections between the appearance in the picture and our memories produce new information and new interpretations. To sum up, photographs themselves do not have a voice that comes directly from a photographer’s mind; and yet, photographs constitute a kind of language that can tell more than the appearances themselves. As Berger quotes from Hugo Hofmann von Hofmannsthal, in photographs we are able “to read what has never been written” (111). Taken as starting points, the photographs offer viewers the opportunity to explore and develop the stories and themes behind the images. These explorations and developments are often boundless and endless. This visual quality distinguishes photography from literature, yet also helps to connect them.

In *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images*, W. J. T. Mitchell discusses the relationship between linguistic and visual representation, pointing out that “Poetry (as ‘making,’ or poesis) is foundational to picturing. Pictures are themselves products of poetry, and a poetics of pictures addresses itself to them, as Aristotle proposed, as if they were living beings, a second nature that human beings have created around themselves” (xv). According to Mitchell, a good picture is primed to tell the viewer a story. It is also the story behind the picture that gives life to a picture. This idea proves the value of studying linguistic and visual representation collaboratively. In the interdisciplinary study of Chinese American and Chinese Canadian literature and photography, both the photographs and literary works are based on the real life of Chinese immigrants and ethnic subjects. Although photographs do not always seem to have a language of their own, they “want equal rights with language, not to be turned into language. They want neither to be leveled into a ‘history of images’ nor elevated into a ‘history of art’; but to be seen as complex individuals occupying multiple subject positions and identities” (Mitchell 47). In short, there is no hierarchy in this interdisciplinary study: both the linguistic and visual representations possess the power and subjectivity to retell the lives studied here. The major difference between photography and literature lies in the nature of these two mediums.

In *La Chambre Claire: Note sur la Photographie*, Roland Barthes claims the following:

le langage est, par nature, fictionnel; pour essayer de rendre le langage infictionnel, il faut un énorme dispositif de mesures: on convoque la logique, ou, à défaut, le serment; mais la Photographie, elle, est indifférente à tout relais: elle n’invente pas; elle est l’authentification même; les artifices, rares, qu’elle permet, ne sont pas probatoires; ce sont, au contraire, des truquages: la photographie n’est laborieuse que lorsqu’elle triche. ... Toute photographie est un certificat de présence. (134-35)

According to Barthes, the conventional nature of language determines that literature always contains constructive elements. Because language is “fictional” by nature, writers need literary techniques to endow literature with credibility. For instance, the stories in Ha Jin’s *A Good Fall* are not completely realistic, as if they were impersonal documents. Ha Jin may have changed the



characters' names, or even combined several life stories into one. By relying on our past experience, we are able to judge if those representations of Chinese American immigrants are "authentic" or true to life as we know it. Photography, apart from the editing techniques that enable us to produce and manipulate a photograph, can only present something that has really existed. Wing Young Huie's photographs of Chinese American immigrants provide solid evidence proving that these individuals and communities do indeed exist. But what do those photographs intend to say? Or how do we interpret them? We do not find the answers to these questions by simply looking at Huie's photographs. We need written words to guide us.

The collaboration of photography and literature is able to shore up the weak points in both forms of representation. As John Berger notes:

in the relation between a photograph and words, the photograph begs for an interpretation, and the words usually supply it. The photograph, irrefutable as evidence but weak in meaning, is given a meaning by the words. And the words, which by themselves remain at the level of generalization, are given specific authenticity by the irrefutability of the photograph. Together the two then become very powerful .... (92)

Writers "reproduce" authentic history in a fictional way according to a set of aesthetic codes and conventions, while photographers visually record authentic historical moments which provide a starting point for the imagination. If we bring literature and photography together, we can argue that photography offers the visual evidence that literature often struggles to envisage, while literature enriches the interpretation of the visual evidence in the photographs.

Let us now turn to the second theoretical foundation for the interdisciplinary study of Chinese American literature and photography: both mediums are concerned with the authentic representation of reality. The writers and photographers included in this dissertation all try to provide truthful insights into the lives of Chinese American and Chinese Canadian immigrants, albeit according to their distinctive conventions. Each artist's unique subjectivity influences his or her approach, whether visual or linguistic.

Since the birth of photography, people have posed in front of the camera. According to Alan Trachtenberg, in the earliest daguerreotype studios, “sitters were encouraged and cajoled to *will* themselves, as it were, into a desired expression,” thereby creating “a role and a mask” (26). Although the avowed purpose of taking a portrait photo is to capture people as they are at a particular moment in time, we tend either to pose in our own way or follow the photographer’s professional instructions. This process conventionally symbolizes our idea what the most “authentic” or “perfect” representation might be. When the majority in a society agrees with this “authentic” representational process, this “role” or “mask” turns into a standard or even a stereotype.

In early American photographers’ framings of Chinese American immigrants, we can detect their focus on the “Chinese traits” — for instance, the pigtail hairstyle, Chinese costume and decorations, and largely expressionless faces. A good example of this is George Grantham Bain’s New York Chinatown collection. Bain framed the above “Chinese traits” in his photographs according to the expectations of the culture to which he belonged. At that time, his photographs reinforced the “Chineseness”: Chinese American immigrants were “Chinese” sojourners and their culture was incompatible with American culture. As such, these early photographs contributed to fixing a stereotypical mask on Chinese American immigrants.

John Berger remarks that a “photographed image of the event, when shown as a photograph, is also part of a cultural construction. It belongs to a specific social situation, the life of the photographer, an argument, an experiment, a way of explaining the world” (93). In George Grantham Bain’s photographs of Chinatown, we have access to Bain’s cultural construction of Chinese migrant identity. His past experience and knowledge told him that Chinese American immigrants were only sojourners from China, thus there were no differences between Chinese and Chinese Americans. As Roland Barthes claims, «la ressemblance est une conformité ... à une identité» (157), because «la ressemblance renvoie à l’identité du sujet, chose dérisoire, purement

civile, pénale même; elle le donne 'en tant que lui-même' » (160). This “resemblance” to Chinese appearance led Bain to emphasize the so-called Chinese traits of Chinese American immigrants. Of course, this way of constructing Chinese migrant identity is, in Barthes’s words, “dérisoire” yet “purement civile, pénale même”. Since photographs are often considered as evidential facts, Bain’s partial representation of Chinese American immigrants “civilizes” the stereotypes, which, to some extent, is “criminal”. Nonetheless, this was how Bain perceived New York Chinatown and its residents and how he wished to tell the American public about this unfamiliar and exotic world.

In similar fashion, in earlier American literature, we are often served distorted and stereotypical depictions of Chinese American immigrants such as Charlie Chan and Susie Wong. By imposing their own willful standards of Chinese characteristics on Chinese American immigrants, many American writers turned them into wholly exotic objects. Later, many Chinese ethnic writers in North America noticed these stereotypical distortions of their people. Some, such as Frank Chin, furiously attacked the stereotypes and endeavored to construct a new and truer Chinese American identity. Although both George Grantham Bain and Frank Chin shared similar goals, they constructed drastically different representations of Chinese American immigrants. What Chin emphasizes in his plays are the qualities of Chinese Americans that distinguish them from Chinese and white Americans: mixed language, hybrid ancestry, ambivalent attitude towards their roots, and so forth. However, to many later Chinese ethnic writers and photographers in North America, Chin also imposed his standards of Chinese American identity on all Chinese American immigrants. This imposition of standards, no matter whether it is in Bain’s photographs or in Chin’s plays, reflects the generic discourse in photography and literature, which is the third theoretical principle for the interdisciplinary study of Chinese migrant and ethnic literature and photography in this dissertation.

Photographs and prose fiction are both a form of power and discourse which Chinese Americans can use to reclaim their rights and redefine their identity. Susan Sontag remarks, “[T]he camera has the power to catch so-called normal people in such a way as to make them look

abnormal. The photographer chooses oddity, chases it, frames it, develops it, titles it” (34).

According to her, a photographer has the power to represent his objects at will. This power endows the photographer with “ever more peremptory rights—to interfere with, to invade, or to ignore whatever is going on” (11). Adopting George Grantham Bain’s perspective of representing Chinese American immigrants, we recognize Bain’s power in choosing the subjects who meet his expectations, framing them within a specific expressive surrounding, and even instructing them to pose for a “truthful” image. The result of Bain’s effort is revealed in the “abnormal” faces of the Chinese American immigrants captured in his photographs. Needless to say, his photographs remind us that one of the central expediencies in the production of these stereotypes was Chinese American immigrants’ lack of power and discourse to represent themselves. As Chinese American immigrant’s economic and social status improved over the past fifty years or so, Chinese American and Canadian writers and photographers took up their pens and cameras to rethink the dismal way in which their identity was represented in the not so distant past.

Since the publication of Frank Chin’s *Aiiieeeee!*, Chinese ethnic writers have been creating their own stories and images and, equally important, also winning attention from the American public. Over the past thirty years, they have begun to speak for themselves, realizing that this is the most effective way to destroy the Orientalist stereotypes to which their parents and grandparents were subjected and redefine Chinese ethnic identity. One of the most outstanding writers of the contemporary generation is David Henry Hwang. In his short play *Trying to Find Chinatown*, Hwang introduces two radically different views of Chinese American identity. In this short play, the two characters at first deny the Orientalist stereotypes of Chinese American identity. Later, however, they argue with each other over the role of cultural ancestry in Chinese American identity formation and ask whether there are any specific qualifications or required traits at all that make one an authentic Chinese American.

The Chinese American photographers studied here are equally involved in redefining Chinese American subjectivity and identity. Roland Barthes argues that «au fond la Photographie est subversive ... lorsqu'elle est *pensive*» (65). When a photographer uses his camera to contemplate and rethink the current situation, his camera becomes a powerful means for him to effect change. Corky Lee uses his photographs to subvert the racial discrimination toward Chinese Americans. His photographs of the civil rights protests and other social events express Chinese Americans' anger toward Orientalist stereotypes and racial discrimination. As John Berger points out, "Every revolutionary protest is also a project against people being the objects of history. And as soon as people feel, as the result of their desperate protest, that they are no longer such objects, history ceases to have the monopoly of time" (104). Lee's stunning and dramatic photographs of Chinese Americans help these mistreated and once silenced people to fight for equal rights. Thanks to Lee's recording and publicizing of a number of protest events, Americans began to listen to the pleas of Chinese Americans. Their voices have pushed the American society and government to make changes. In short, Lee's photographs are now seen as an important contribution to both Chinese American history and American history, in the sense that they have helped to empower Chinese Americans to help write American history.

In conclusion, this dissertation will lead us to look back at the development of the Chinese immigrant experience in North America from the late nineteenth century to today, through the complementary media of literary and photographic representations. In this comparative and interdisciplinary study, I try to present Chinese immigrants' struggles against various hardships, above all the language obstacle, the effects of stereotyping, and racial discrimination. Their struggles and contributions have often been little-known or even entirely neglected in the history of North America. In this dissertation, therefore, I will also emphasize Chinese immigrants' fight for recognition and equal rights, both through the medium of literature and photography. Along with the rise of their economic and social status, their voices are now part of the mainstream culture and the

struggles they endured are increasingly receiving scholarly attention. It is my hope, too, that this dissertation will contribute to the ongoing cultural work that lies ahead for Chinese ethnics in North America and, more generally, will help to destroy the stereotypes and unfair social hierarchies that continue to plague other groups of newly arrived immigrants.

## **Chapter 2. The influences of backgrounds on the experiences of Chinese immigrants**

Chapter 2 focuses on the question of how different social and economic backgrounds influence the lives of Chinese immigrants in North America. More specifically, I will discuss Chinese immigrants' occupations and their family and home milieus. I will begin with a general survey of the Chinese American immigrants' occupations represented in literature and photography from the 1890s to the present. Then I will focus on a special type of immigrant: fugitive government officials who have fled from China to the United States. In my discussion of home and family, I will use the site of Chinatown, often taken as the Chinese American immigrants' home away from China. Subsequently, I will examine the smaller home and family relationships within it. Through analyzing these two aspects, we discover that Chinese American immigrants are actually homeless. This social and existential condition of homelessness leads to the immigrants' mixed and unstable identity.

### **2.1 Occupations**

In this part I inspect Chinese American immigrants' occupations from the late 19th century until today and how different occupations influence their lives. Arnold Genthe's photographs of San Francisco Chinatown from the 1890s to 1930 present a panoramic view of early Chinese American immigrants' occupations and living conditions. As these conditions change, so do their occupations. Ha Jin's short story collection *A Good Fall* realistically illustrates how contemporary Chinese American immigrants counter difficulties in various occupations. In his photographs of contemporary Chinese American immigrants' occupations, Wing Young Huie provides a rich visual representation to accompany Ha Jin's literary representation. Among the contemporary Chinese American immigrants, fugitive government officials are beginning to attract more scholarly attention from the public in recent years. Qiu Xiaolong's detective novel *A Case of Two Cities* indirectly describes this special type of immigrants' life. Taken together, these various literary and

visual “texts” present an elaborate but succinct picture of the occupational backgrounds on Chinese American immigrants.

One of the most direct ways to analyze early Chinese American immigrants’ occupations from the early period of the 1890s is through photographic records. Most of the photographs of Chinese American immigrants were taken in Chinatowns where the newly arrived immigrants were able to find ways to survive. The San Francisco Chinatown is the site of the earlier visual documentation of Chinese American immigrants. However, the 1906 earthquake and fire destroyed much of the historical Chinatown. It also destroyed the precious historical documents and photographs of the old Chinatown in San Francisco libraries and government archives. Luckily, a German-born photographer named Arnold Genthe had moved his negatives of Chinatown to his friend’s vault before the earthquake (Vanderbilt 17). These negatives have now become one of the few remaining sources on the pre-earthquake Chinatown and its residents. Two years after the earthquake, Genthe published these photographs in an album entitled *Pictures of Old Chinatown* with text by writer Will Irwin.

Arnold Genthe arrived in America in 1895 after obtaining a doctoral degree in philosophy in Germany. He came to San Francisco as a tutor for the son of Baron von Schroeder (Tchen 3). In the German guide book to San Francisco that Genthe had with him, he found an intriguing sentence: “It is not advisable to visit the Chinese quarter unless one is accompanied by a guide” (Genthe 32). This “Chinese quarter” is the Chinatown, which in eyes of visitors was mysterious, exotic and even dangerous. However, when Genthe ventured into Chinatown out of curiosity, it fascinated him immediately. In his memoir *As I Remember*, Genthe writes, “As soon as I could make myself free, I was on my way to Chinatown, where I was to go again and again” (32). He wanted to share what he saw here with his family, sending local postcards and sketches of the local residents. But none of them met his satisfaction. Later he tried his hand at the more efficient and satisfying method—



photography. The result of Genthe's numerous adventures to Chinatown between 1895 and 1906 was over 200 photographs on glass negatives.

However, neither Genthe's guide book nor his own perception of it as "Canton of the West" accurately represented the San Francisco Chinatown. Historian Anthony W. Lee describes the development of Chinatown until the 1880s as "centered initially on a one-block portion of Sacramento Street, an east-west thoroughfare that ran in a straight line from the wharf to Nob Hill. By the mid-1850s, Chinatown had spread in either direction along Sacramento Street, especially extending north along Dupont Street. It was this second, perpendicular, line of growth, along Dupont, that to most early observers visually declared Chinatown's existence" (9) (See Figure 1). The name "Chinatown" came from non-Chinese speakers. Its original name for the residents there was Tangrenbu (in Chinese characters 唐人埠) meaning the Port of Chinese People. From this name, we know that the original function of the locale was a wharf for Chinese merchants to import and export Chinese and American merchandise. In the 1850s, these Chinese merchants brought back home the news of the discovery of gold in America. More Chinese merchants and workers traveled across the ocean to San Francisco for pioneering ventures and landed in Tangrenbu. From then on, it gradually became the main settlement of early Chinese immigrants in America.

However, most Chinese immigrants did not live in San Francisco Chinatown, nor were Chinese business restricted to these streets. According to John Kuo Wei Tchen, "fully 80 percent of the Chinese in California in the 1850s and 60s were distributed throughout the mining areas" (5). The Chinatown residents provided various services for the Chinese mine workers around the city. In 1856, the first Chinese-language paper in San Francisco, *The Oriental*, published a directory listing Chinese American immigrants' occupations and services in Chinatown: "33 general merchandise stores, 15 Chinese herb stores, five doctors, five restaurants, five butchers, three tailors, three boarding houses, three wood yards, three bakers, two silversmiths, one wood engraver, one curio carver, one broker from American merchants, and a Chinese interpreter" (Chinn, *A History* 10). This



record reflects that by the middle of the nineteenth century, there were already Chinese immigrants from various backgrounds and working in diverse occupations in San Francisco. Yet the rising population of Chinese miners and workers in California ignited the xenophobic anti-Chinese roundups and persecutions. As Jean Pfaelzer notes, “at least 302 lynchings occurred in California between 1849 and 1902. Of these, about 200 were of Asian people” (54). One of the most infamous purges against Chinese immigrants took place in November 1885 in Tacoma, Washington (Pfaelzer viii). All Chinese in the town were driven out. Many Chinese refugees fled to San Francisco Chinatown for protection. As a result, San Francisco Chinatown in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century became a very diversified Chinese migrant community. Genthe’s photographs documented this era.

The turn of the nineteenth century marks the rise of tourism in America. So Genthe was not the only photographer who captured the San Francisco Chinatown at that time. Carleton Watkins took photographs of the locale from the 1870s to the 1880s; Isaiah West Taber shot most of his pictures of Chinatown in the 1870s and early 1880s; Lewis Hine photographed Chinatown from the 1910s to the 1920s; and a later student of Genthe’s, Dorothea Lange, also took a few photographs in San Francisco’s Chinatown in 1924. However, Genthe’s special experience and photographic methods really distinguish him from other photographers.

Unlike other photographers, Genthe’s photographs of San Francisco Chinatown were not commissioned. He took these photographs mostly for the interest of himself and his patron, Baron von Schroeder. The von Schroeder family was extremely wealthy and prestigious. The Baroness von Schroeder “was the daughter of railroad magnate and bander Mervyn Donohue” (Tchen 9). Genthe’s main occupation was the Latin and French tutor of Baron von Schroeder’s son Heini (Genthe 34). In order to create a reputation for himself and move up socially, he joined the California Camera Club and contributed a series of photographs of Chinatown (Genthe 40). Grace Kyungwon Hong noticed that the majority of these photographs were “eventually published in local

magazines, purchased for private homes, and even exhibited in a gallery” (8-9). Therefore, these photographs, in Tchen’s words, were “a vehicle for his personal artistry as a means of earning a living” (15). On the other hand, Genthe’s personal interest drew him closer to the subjects he photographed.

In fact, Genthe had made friends with a number of residents from various backgrounds in San Francisco’s Chinatown. In his memoir, Genthe recalls having dinner with wealthy merchants’ family and his friendship with a fortuneteller and an old opium smoker (36-9). These contacts provided him with special opportunities and advantages to observe and better represent these Chinese immigrants in his photographs. This experience enriched his portrayal of Chinese American immigrants as real-life individuals whom outsiders could meet and be friends. In this sense, Genthe’s perspective is different from the prevailing trend at that time that pictured Chinese immigrants as a group of exotic, mysterious, and even dangerous mobs.

Nonetheless, Genthe was far from being a true insider of San Francisco Chinatown. He could not really understand the residents and their culture in depth. His incorrect labels and captions are solid evidence. For example, he mistook a butcher selling animal parts for a fish peddler and a chicken seller for a vegetable peddler (Tchen 13). Even so, Genthe’s photographs still give us a direct perception of the residents in Chinatown as diverse individuals with souls and stories.

Another aspect that differentiates Genthe from other photographers is his candid street photography. Genthe’s contemporaries tended to take studio portraits of Chinese American immigrants. While Genthe preferred to go out into the streets and capture the residents’ life in motion. This task was not easy. According to Genthe, “the inhabitants of Chinatown had a deep-seated superstition about having their pictures taken. To them the camera was a ‘black devil box’ in which all the evils of the earth were bottled up, ready to pounce upon them”; so whenever they saw a camera pointing at them, they would run away immediately (34-5). As a result, Genthe had to use a small detective camera with a Zeiss lens and rapid shutter and often “hide in doorways or peer out

from an angle of a building at some street corner” to capture the image he wanted (Genthe 35). Therefore, in most of his photographs, the subjects were unaware of Genthe’s presence. Yet, his explanation of Chinese American immigrants’ shyness in front of the camera is not true. As I mentioned in my Introduction, Chinese American immigrants had access to cameras and photography way before Genthe’s adventure in Chinatown. To the residents there, cameras were not something unfamiliar or the cause of superstition, as Genthe believed. They ran away from cameras because of the potential danger and hostility from the outsiders. As Tchen points out, “having experienced American anti-Chinese hostility in virtually all areas of everyday life, the Chinese came to realize that the best way to survive was to avoid unnecessary contact with unknown whites” (11). Most residents in Chinatown, whether children or adults, would act cautiously when they saw an unfamiliar white photographer approaching. Chinese American immigrants’ cautiousness forced Genthe to adopt a secretive angle for his photographic forays. As a result his photographs turned out to be a relatively spontaneous depiction of Chinese immigrants in their unguarded daily lives.

Genthe’s photographs covered Chinese immigrants from a large variety of occupational backgrounds. If we have to group them, there are roughly three categories: merchants, workers, and women. Although each immigrant was obviously unique, the individuals in the same category still shared many economic, social, cultural, and gender similarities. Next I will introduce these three categories one by one with the illustration of Genthe’s photographs.

The merchants in San Francisco Chinatown belonged to the first wave of Chinese immigrants in California. They arrived in San Francisco in the late 1840s and 1850s from the wealthy Sanyi (三邑 means “Three Districts” : Nanhai (南海), Panyu (番禺), and Shunde(顺德)) and Zhongshan (中山) area in Guangdong Province (Tchen 42). Due to the geographical advantage of being close to the sea, the merchants from Sanyi and Zhongshan had a long history of commercial trade with the Western world. Their trade goods included silk, ceramics, fish, crops, tea and many

others (Tchen 42). However, economically, the Manchurian Qing Government strictly controlled importation and exportation. What was worse, after the loss of the Opium War (1839-42) to the British Empire, the Qing Government had to pay a huge amount of indemnities. As a consequence, the Qing regime “increased taxes to eighteen times the customary rate in Guangdong province” (Yin 13). These merchants had a hard time in conducting foreign business. In order to avoid the heavy taxes, many merchants went abroad to try their luck. From their Western partners’ mouth, they heard of the freer market outside China. Later they decided to leave their homeland and became the pioneering Chinese population in San Francisco.

Driven by economic profit, they “quickly learned English and American ways, became skilled at American-style business transactions, and developed strategies for public relations with the general San Francisco population” (Tchen 42). Of course, the city’s local businessmen and public officials welcomed these Chinese migrant merchants, since they also brought trade and profit from China. In 1877 Cornelius B. S. Gibbs, a marine-insurance adjuster, highly praised the Chinese merchants in San Francisco in the following words: “As men of business, I considered that the Chinese merchants are fully equal to our merchants. As men of integrity, I have never met a more honorable, high-minded, correct, and truthful set of men than the Chinese merchants of our city” (United, *Report* 530). Within a few years, Chinese migrant merchants had expanded their business beyond California and reached the larger part of the American west. In America, most of them continued their former business and occupations in China. According to Tchen’s study:

A hierarchy of businesses developed along economic and district-of-origin lines. Wealthier Sanyi tended to control the larger, commercially successful companies, such as import-export firms. Nanhai District people monopolized the men’s clothing and tailoring trade, in addition to butcher shops. Neighboring Shunde District folk controlled the overalls and workers’s clothing factories. Chinese hailing from the Zhongshan District... controlled the fish businesses and fruit-orchard work, and predominated in the woman’s garment, shirt, and underwear sewing factories. (42)

Their factories, shops, and services targeted on both Chinese migrant community and American customers. Success made these Chinese migrant merchants' lives in America rather enjoyable and well-off, compared to those of the Chinese migrant workers. Genthe was lucky enough to become acquainted with some wealthy Chinese migrant merchants in San Francisco Chinatown. Taking full advantage of this opportunity, Genthe captured their lives in his photographs.

The Chinese migrant merchants in Genthe's photographs were seldom pictured at work. Most of them were either walking or standing in the streets with their children. For example, in Figure 2, "Children of High Class", we see a well-dressed merchant taking a walk with his two sons. From



Figure 2. Arnold Genthe. "Children of High Class". 1896. Library of Congress



Tchen's note to this photograph in *Genthe's Photographs of San Francisco's Old Chinatown*, we learn that the merchant's name is Lew Kan. He was "a labor manager of Chinese working in the Alaskan canneries. He also operated a store called Fook On Lung at 714 Sacramento Street between Kearney and Dupont" (Tchen 45). His two sons are Lew Bing You (middle) and Lew Bing Yuen (right). In the picture, Lew Kan's hat, jacket, and pants are all made of silk. The boys are wearing "very formal clothing made of satin with a black velvet overlay" (Tchen 45). Obviously, common Chinese migrant workers could not afford these clothes. In the photo, we see many dark spots lightly covering the ground. Those are exploded firecrackers. If we associate the firecrackers with the "wish and bless" pattern on the two boys' jackets, we can tell that Genthe shot this photograph during the Chinese New Year. Perhaps Lew Kan was taking his sons to buy new year gifts from the street market.



Figure 3. Arnold Genthe. "A Picnic on Portsmouth Square". 1896. Library of Congress.

Genthe must have known Lew Kan very well, because he took many intimate photographs of this wealthy merchant's family life. In a photograph titled "A Picnic on Portsmouth Square" (Figure



3), we see a family servant and Lew Kan's four other daughters have a picnic on the lawn. The woman in the light color jacket is the oldest daughter, and the three children are her younger sisters (Tchen 46). The woman on the right is the house servant. The plain and dark jacket and the apron tied around her waist reveal her status. She is attending to the children. This photograph suggests that this merchant's family was able to enjoy their life of leisure without having to worry about getting by or even housework.

Many Chinese migrate merchants were rich enough to hire not only house servants but also bodyguards. Figure 4 is Genthe's photograph depicting a "Merchant and Bodyguard". The strong man wearing a silk robe and walking in the foreground is said to be a wealthy merchant and perhaps



Figure 4. Arnold Genthe. "Merchant and Bodyguard". 1896. Library of Congress.

also a tong leader in Chinatown (Tchen 86). The man in black following behind is his bodyguard (Tchen 86). Tongs were secret organizations or brotherhood often related to criminal violence in Chinatowns. Their leaders were usually wealthy merchants. Tongs were involved in businesses such as prostitution, gambling, and drugs. There were conflicts and even wars between different tongs when they were fighting for business or territories. Thus, it could be dangerous for tong leaders to walk out alone if a rival tong sought for revenge. The bodyguard in the photograph is looking sideways, as if on the lookout. The merchant seems confident and relaxed, probably because of the presence of his bodyguard.

At that time, another privilege which Chinese migrant merchants enjoyed was the fact that they could bring wives from China. In 1875, the U.S. Congress passed the Page Act, which



Figure 5. Arnold Genthe. "Waiting for the Car". ca. 1904. Library of Congress.

prohibited the immigration of any Chinese woman who was not a merchant's wife. According to Jean Pfaelzer, the Page Act "forced the overall ratio to fall from seventy-eight Chinese female per one thousand Chinese males in 1870 to forty-seven per one thousand in 1880" (105). Due to Chinese merchants' good reputation in America, they were exempt from the act and were able to keep their families together. Genthe's photographs provided evidence of Chinese migrant merchants' wives. For instance, in Figure 5, "Waiting for the Car", there is a female figure in this photo of a merchant's family. As Tchen notes, she is Mrs. Sue, and the man on the left is her brother-in-law (46). Mrs. Sue's husband "ran a 'boarding house,' which fed male workers at nine in the morning and four in the afternoon, while Mrs. Sue took in sewing" (Tchen 46). The Sue family was not as rich as the merchants who owned house servants and bodyguards in the previous two photographs. Still, the man's leather shoes, the shoes of the two children, the girl's delicate jacket and precious headdress, and Mrs. Sue's silk outfit indicate that this family is relatively well off.

According to Tchen, in the 1850s, "over 80 percent of the Chinese immigrants in North America" were poor peasants and laborers from Siyi (四邑, meaning Four Districts: Xinhui新会, Taishan台山, Enping恩平, and Kaiping开平) in Guangdong Province. They came to find the "gold mountains" in America. They entered the country through labor contracts with Chinese merchants or were smuggled in. Some labored in gold mines or helped build railways; some were workers or domestic servants for the white or Chinese migrant merchants; and some became farmers or pickers in orchards. In contrast to the term "Chinese migrant merchants", I use the term "Chinese migrant workers" to refer to these disadvantaged laborers, workers, and farmers.

While Chinese migrant merchants had capital to establish their business themselves in America, these early Chinese migrant workers were not economically independent. They found jobs wherever they could, no matter whether their bosses were Chinese migrant merchants or white Americans. Since most of them did not sign a labor contract, they could lose their job at any time. If

they were lucky, they could find steadier jobs such as laundry work or house servants for wealthy white (Tchen 61). However, because these Chinese migrant workers had only their labor to sell, their work was very toilsome. Most of them needed to work sixteen hours, and sometimes even twenty hours, a day in order to get by (Tchen 62).

Due to the 1875 Page Act, which allowed only Chinese merchants' wives to enter America, and the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which forbade the entry of Chinese laborers, most Chinese migrant workers had broken or no families in America. Living in a bachelor society, they constantly looked back to China and hoped to bring their families to America. Some could not bear the loneliness, so they worked hard to save money for their journey back to China. The majorities sought solaces through gambling, smoking opium, visiting prostitutes, or attending the Chinese theater when they were off work on Sundays (Tchen 62).

Since Chinese migrant workers had little education and almost no contact with the West before their departure, they could not speak or understand English. In order to get along, they had to depend on Chinese migrant merchants for jobs and their fellow workers to take care of each other. Chinatown provided these migrant workers the protection and security they so desperately needed. Many Chinese migrant workers came to America with skills such as farming, fishing, and other crafts. After they arrived in America, the majority of them continued their former occupations in Chinatown. The relatively wealthy ones might rent a storefront from a wealthy Chinese migrant merchant and open a store with others. Other penniless workers would "hang around stores ..., getting odd jobs at the fish market and grocery stores. Some earned a marginal existence from peddling odds and ends on the streets of Chinatown" (Tchen 61). Such was the general occupational situation of Chinese migrant workers in San Francisco Chinatown. Arnold Genthe's photographs included this group, too.

In contrast to the depiction of the migrant merchants, the Chinese laborers in Genthe's photographs are always depicted working. This is a sharp contrast to Chinese migrant merchants'

leisure life shown in Genthe's photographs of the same period. Also, their ragged clothes easily distinguish the migrant workers from the well-dressed merchants. In Figure 6, the photograph titled "Fish Alley" shows three Chinese migrant workers working at a fish and poultry store in Washington Place, which was also known as "Fish Alley". According to Tchen, Washington Place is "the major site of meat, poultry, and fish markets" in San Francisco Chinatown (34). A laborer named Fong described the atmosphere of Washington Street as follows: "it is so goddam wet, it used to be cobblestone and full of telephone poles. And it's so wet that the lines between the cobblestones were all molded because of the horse manure, people spit on it, the wets from the horses, and plus the fog, daily fog" (Nee 99). Owners chose to open fish stores here because they



Figure 6. Arnold Genthe. "Fish Alley". 1896. Library of Congress.

were near to the wharf. They could carry the freshly caught fish directly to their stores. The store in this photograph is a good representative of the Fish Alley. From the peeling plaster on the brick wall and the uneven ground in front of the store, we can speculate that the store owner was not rich enough to own or rent a decent place. In the foreground, there is a bamboo-weaved tray containing dried fish. On the two sides of the doorstep, processed and freshly cut fish is arranged on two wooden boards. On the left side, there is a cage for poultry holding up the wooden slab for fish. Three workers in soiled clothes stand by a table cleaning fish. There are a dozen freshly killed poultry hanging down near their heads. None of them notice the photographer. This seems like an improvised peek at their daily job. However, the dark background inside the store prevents us from



Figure 7. Arnold Genthe. "The Fish Dealer's Daughter". 1896. Library of Congress.

seeing their life behind the counter. Genthe's another photograph gives us further ideas of a fish dealer's life.

Figure 7, titled "The Fish Dealer's Daughter", depicts a little Chinese migrant girl standing in front of several large baskets. From her tattered sleeves and oversized wrinkled pants, we can imagine that she must have worked a lot for her father, perhaps carrying those baskets behind her. In the shade, there is a bowl on the table. Maybe the single bowl contains her lunch. This image of a fish dealer's daughter contrasts sharply with the wealthy merchants' daughters we discussed in Figure 3. The fish dealer's daughter has to work at a very young age and cannot afford a fancy dress or special food; while the merchant's daughters seem to have everything — food, clothes, and servants to take them out on a picnic. Tchen's note to this photograph tells us that it was probably taken at Point San Pedro's Chinese shrimp camp, not in San Francisco Chinatown; and those baskets were used to carry shrimps (36). Point San Pedro was one of the many villages which "provide Chinatown merchants with dried shrimp for export back to China and to sell in 'Fish Alley'" (Tchen 36). No doubt, the prosperity of San Francisco Chinatown and Chinese migrant merchants' wealthy life would not be possible without these Chinese migrant fish workers' hard work.

Compared with the fish dealers in the Fish Alley, most Chinese migrant workers were not able to have a stable job or rent a store. Many would put up a simple stand at some street corners and wait for their business to pass by. Among Genthe's many friends in San Francisco Chinatown, there was a fortune teller named San Lung whom Genthe mentioned in his memoir *As I Remember*. San Lung usually sat at the corner of Stockton and Clay Streets day and night when "there was promise of a tourist invasion" (Genthe 36-7). According to Genthe's recollection, San Lung's customers were tourists and sometimes American tourists, since he could speak simple English (37). Yet San Lung used a Chinese method to predict the future: drawing sticks from a box and reading the meaning written on the sticks (Genthe 37). Later, Genthe found out that San Lung had been killed



Figure 8. Arnold Genthe. "The Fortune Teller". 1896. Library of Congress.

by a bullet in a tong war. From Genthe's short friendship with San Lung, we have a glimpse of a Chinese migrant fortune teller's unstable and dangerous life in Chinatown. Among Genthe's photo collections of San Francisco Chinatown, there is a portrait of a Chinese fortune teller (Figure 8), but we do not know if it is his friend San Lung.

In this photograph, the fortune teller sits behind a simple table. A pile of books for interpreting the future lie beside his elbow. Next to the books, there is a dark box for drawing sticks as Genthe noted. The fortune teller wears a pair of glasses. Probably because of his old age, he needs them to help him read the interpretations in the books. Behind him on the wall, there hangs a cloth banner with two bold characters, 卦命. The two characters mean "predicting destiny". Perhaps, the banner, the table, the books, the box and the stool he is sitting on are all he owns. He could not afford to



rent a storefront or hire an assistant. It may seem ironic that he is able to foresee his customers' future but not how his own life and business would continue in the future.

This fortune teller was by no means the most wretched resident in San Francisco Chinatown. Most Chinese migrant workers, like the fish dealer and fortune teller, had some skills that helped them survive. But for those without any skills, their life in Chinatown was very miserable indeed. The paper gatherer in Figure 9 belongs to this category. Paper gatherers' job was to pick up scraps



Figure 9. Arnold Genthe. "The Paper Gatherer". 1896. Library of Congress.

of paper from streets and walls. According to Tchen, they were mostly hired by The Wenhua she 文  
华社, or "Society of the Splendors of Literature" to "collect any refuse paper with writing on it. It  
was considered a crime for any paper with writing on it to be tossed away" (66). This job did not  
require any skills, so it was ideal for unskilled and old Chinese immigrants. In this photograph by  
Arnold Genthe, an old paper gatherer sits in front of a closed door at a street corner. He is huddled  
in an oversized thick jacket with torn cuffs. It must be winter. Yet, his pants are too short to cover  
his ankles. He is not wearing socks underneath his broken shoes. His long hair and weed-like beard

indicate that it has been long since the last time he shaved and bathed himself. He is holding a small portion of food in his left hand and a tin pot in the right. There is another dark pot sitting in front of him. Evidently, he is having his lunch there outside a closed door. One wonders, does he have a place to stay at night? The long steel stick serves as his tool for removing paper from the ground and walls. The large woven bag next to him and the small one he is sitting on most likely contain the paper he has just gathered. The wall used for posters and announcements in the background delineate his working environment. The four shadows at the lower right corner suggestively enhance the paper gatherer's loneliness. Genthe's photograph reflects how the most vulnerable Chinese immigrants lived at the bottom of the community.

As I mentioned above, because of the discriminatory Page Act of 1875 and the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, women made up a very small percentage of the Chinese migrant population in San Francisco's Chinatown in the late nineteenth century. According to Mary Roberts Coolidge, the United States census registered 2,790 Chinese women in San Francisco in 1890, but this number dropped sharply to 1,303 in 1900 (498-502). If we compare it to the number of male, the ratio of Chinese migrant male to female was more than twenty to one (Coolidge 498-502). These women entered America either as merchants' wives or through smuggling. After their arrival, these women were limited to "three primary occupational roles, ... a merchant's wife, a house servant, or a prostitute" (Tchen 96).

According to the norms of traditional patriarchal value, married women seldom appeared in public unaccompanied. Only on special holidays, such as New Year or the Good Lady Festival (it was celebrated once every seven years), were women, especially wives of wealthy families, allowed to walk in the streets with their families. As a result, apart from female children, there are only a few photographs of Chinese migrant women in Genthe's San Francisco Chinatown collection. The photograph "Waiting for the Car" (Figure 5) was captured during the Chinese New Year. The children's colorful outfit matches the holiday atmosphere. In contrast, Mrs. Sue wears a black silk-

on-silk embroidered jacket, black pants, and black silk shoes. The color black distinguishes her from prostitutes who usually wore bright colors; while her silk clothes, earrings, and silk handkerchief separate her from the plainly dressed house servants. Nonetheless, the family was always the Chinese migrant wives' only concern and duty.

The second type of job that Chinese migrant women chose was house servants. This job was relatively stable but not necessarily well-paid. Basically, they took care of the housework and children in wealthy Chinese migrant families or white American families. In Figure 3, we see a house servant taking care of merchant Lew Kan's children at a picnic. Figure 10, titled "Carrying New Year's Presents", is another photograph by Genthe that shows a female house servant shopping

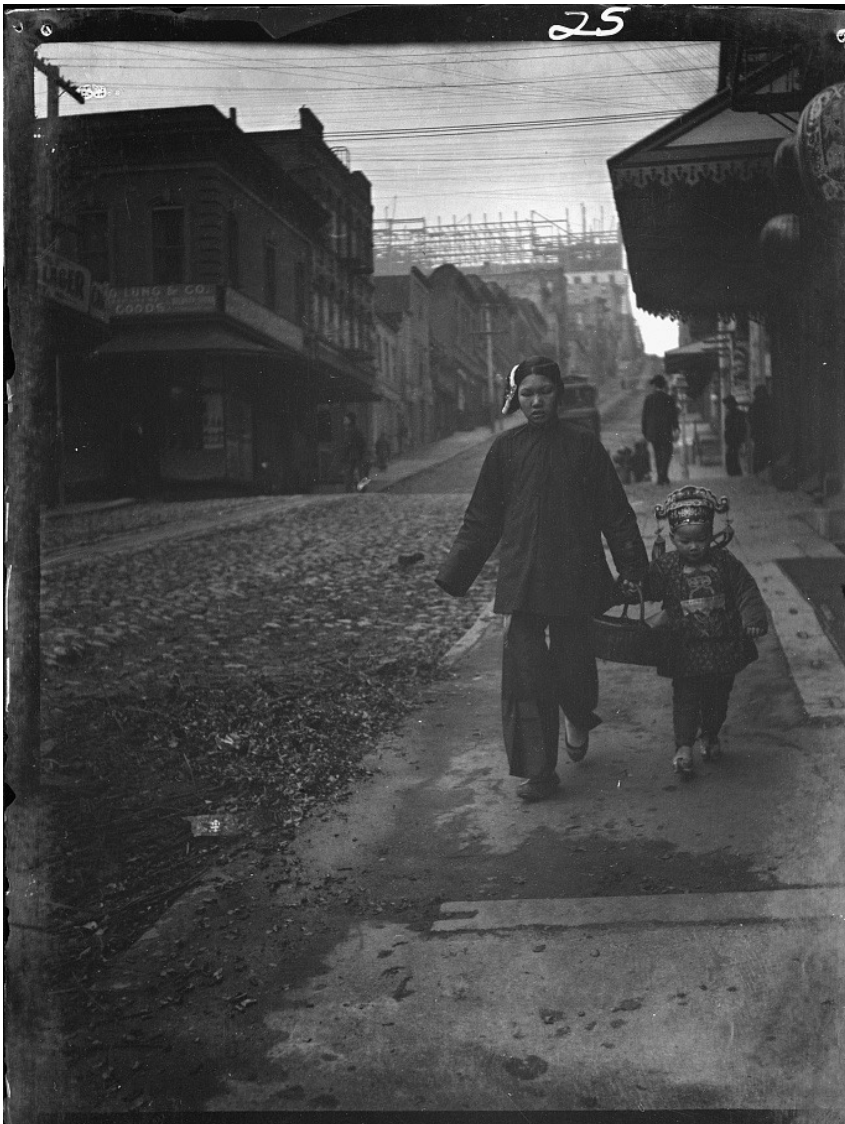


Figure 10. Arnold Genthe. "Carrying New Year's Presents". 1896. Library of Congress.

with Lew Kan's son. We are not sure if the woman in this photograph is the same as the one in Figure 3. Yet the woman's plain style of dress in Figure 10 is in sharp contrast to the fancy decorations on the wealthy merchant's son. The basket connects her to the boy. It symbolizes her labor contract with the family and her everyday duty: housework and children. Without this bond, it would be difficult for her to live independently.

As for Chinese migrant prostitutes, their lives were not easy, either. Most of them did not choose this occupation; rather they were sold to the brothels in Chinatown under contracts. In effect, Americans called them "slave girls". These brothels were concentrated in Jackson Street (Tchen 30), Bartlett's Alley, and Sullivan's Alley (Tchen 84). Their customers included Chinese migrant merchants, workers, and non-Chinese, depending on the grade of the brothels. If a prostitute got "lucky", some wealthy merchants might buy her out and then marry her. The local American missionaries and religious organizations also noticed these prostitutes' existence in Chinatown. They conducted many rescue missions to save them from slavery and prostitutes. One of the leaders of this campaign was Genthe's friend Donaldina Cameron. According to Genthe, she was "for many years the head of the Chinese Presbyterian Mission, and a truly noble and courageous woman. At the risk of her life, ... she had rescued many girls from the toils of the slave-traffic" (39). Cameron provided these girl prostitutes with housing, food, clothing, and education in the hope of "redeeming their virtue" (Phu, "Spectacles" 77). Through Cameron, Genthe met the rescued girls and took some indoor portraits of them. But many Chinese migrant prostitutes worked their entire lives under these sex-slave contracts. To capture their lives, Genthe ventured into Jackson Street where many brothels were located.

Figure 11 is titled "A Slave Girl in Holiday Attire". It was taken at the intersection of Dupont and Jackson streets. In the picture, a young woman is walking alone in the street in a fancy and colorful New Year outfit. Since it was unusual for Chinese wives to walk out in colorful clothes without accompaniment, we can presume that the girl in the photo is a prostitute. In Tchen's note to



Figure 11. Arnold Genthe. "A Slave Girl in Holiday Attire". 1896. Library of Congress.

this photograph, he also remarks that she "is said to have been an especially beautiful and popular prostitute" in the San Francisco Chinatown (30). The street behind her is Jackson Street, where we see several non-Chinese in Western clothes. They are probably tourists curious about the "Red Light District" in Chinatown. The lettering on the sign in the background is in English. This suggests that the frequent customers in this district were both Chinese immigrants and English-speaking Americans. For outsiders, this was a district of exotic and erotic fantasy. But for Chinese migrant prostitutes, this was their community and work, no matter how debasing.

\* \* \*

The above is Arnold Genthe's photographic presentation of Chinese American immigrants' various occupations and living situations at the turn of the Nineteenth Century. As the Twentieth Century unfolded, Chinese American immigrants were successful in improving their economic status and occupational opportunities. One reason for this was undoubtedly the abolishment of the previous discriminative migration policies. For example, the Public Law 89-239 (October 1965) abolished the national quota system (Ng, "An Evaluation" 116). Another reason is Chinese American immigrants' own persistent struggle to better their lives. According to Daniel E. Jaco and George L. Wilber's study on Asian Americans in American labor market in 1970, Chinese American immigrants are "relatively successful in the job market and have higher overall labor force participation than whites" (33). Their study shows that Chinese Americans had a higher employment rate and a higher number in the upper income level, compared to other ethnic groups in America in 1970. Chinese Americans were involved in not only traditional service occupations but also in clerical and technical positions. One major reason was Chinese American immigrants' high educational attainment level. In 1970, Chinese American immigrants had the "largest proportion of college graduates", which was "more than 25 percent of those age 25 and over" in America (Jaco 33). However, the big picture of Chinese American immigrants' occupations in 1970 was not equally bright. Around 25 percent of the population, that is the majority, were in "professional and service occupations, whereas whites cluster[ed] among operative and in clerical work" (Ng, "An Evaluation" 107). These statistics reflect that in 1970 although Chinese American immigrants had narrowed the occupational gap with other ethnic groups, yet the majority were still doing menial or service work, not managerial or clerical work.

From the 1970s up to the present, Chinese Americans' occupational situation continues to improve. Chinese American immigrants' high rate of higher education has evidently brought them more economic and social advantages. According to the report *The Asian-American Labor Force in the Recovery* conducted by U.S. Department of Labor in 2010, people with Chinese ethnicity had

much lower unemployment rate (at 6.5%) compared to the Whites' 8.7%, the Blacks' 16.0%, and the Hispanics' 12.5% (2-3). And approximately "three-fifths of employed people of Chinese" ethnicity had a college degree (U.S. Department of Labor 2-3). Beyond that, menial and service jobs are not Chinese Americans' major choice any more. Instead, they are active in many high-wage, professional careers such as science, architecture and engineering, finance, and social sciences. According to the 2010 United States Census, 53.1% of Chinese Americans worked in white collar professions, compared to a national average of 35.1%.

Nonetheless, these inspiring numbers do not overshadow the fact that there are still many Chinese Americans who face occupational hardships. Especially those who are poor, less educated, and who lack proficiency in English could only work long hours in low-paying jobs. Their life and work are confined within Chinese ethnic enclaves. Many have to maintain connections to their families in China, because both sides rely on their incomes in America. Some Chinese migrant writers and photographers have paid special attention to these less advantaged immigrants. Writer Ha Jin (1956- ) and photographer Wing Young Huie (1955- ) have spent considerable time in depicting and recording their occupations and lives.

Since the novel *A Free Life*, Ha Jin began to write about the lives of Chinese American immigrants in America. This was a significant change from the themes of his previous novels and stories set in China. His story collection *A Good Fall* (2009) presents a large spectrum of Chinese American immigrants of various ages, occupations, and social backgrounds. The characters in the stories are often ordinary immigrants working in low-income jobs, such as a waitress, a deliveryman, students, prostitutes, garment workers, etc. Invariably Ha Jin's characters attempt to adjust to American culture and society through hard work, but their ties to China and Chinese culture are constantly holding them back. They have to transform themselves to face the challenges in their occupations and lives.

All twelve of the stories in *A Good Fall* are set in Flushing, New York City. It is a neighborhood in the north-central part of Queens. Main Street and Roosevelt Avenue compose the downtown area in Flushing. Flushing used to be a Dutch and English colony in the Seventeenth Century. In the 1970s, a large wave of immigrants from Taiwan arrived and established a Chinese community here. Although numerous ethnic groups, including people of Asian, Hispanic, Middle Eastern, European, and African American ancestry, reside in this neighborhood, Chinese American immigrants quickly became the majority here after several decades' development and the incessant influx of new immigrants from Taiwan, Mainland China and Hong Kong. In 1990, 41 percent of the population in Flushing were of Asian ancestry, among which Chinese immigrants amounted to 41 percent (Zhou, "Chinese" 159). In 2000, it became the second largest Chinatown in New York City, with 33,526 Chinese and Chinese American residents (Beekman).

Chinese-owned businesses also expanded during the past three decades in Flushing. In 1982, Chinese-owned businesses in Flushing included only "five grocery stores, three restaurants, two supermarkets, one real estate agency, a professional building, a drug and herbal store, and a beauty salon" (Zhou, "Chinese" 160). Five years later, there were already "310 Chinese-owned businesses [which] operate in Flushing" (Silva 3). In 1990, "over half of the consumption needs of Chinese residents in the area were being met" by local Chinese business (Zhou, "Chinese" 160). Now, Flushing has become one of the largest central business districts in New York City.

Ha Jin's stories take place in Flushing. Yet, the Chinese American immigrants he depicts do not enjoy the wealth and freedom represented by the development of the community at large. They invariably suffer a variety of hardships in their lives and on their jobs. As Ha Jin mentioned in a National Public Radio interview, a "lot of the details were factual" in *A Good Fall* ("Chinese Author"). In 2005, he went to a conference in the center of Flushing and was "very touched by the scenes on the streets" (Ha, "Chinese Author"). Later he gathered information from newspapers, the internet, and people's mouths and composed the twelve stories about Chinese American



immigrants' lives in Flushing. Because of its intense focus on this theme, drawing on characters from nearly all social classes, his fictional Flushing faithfully represents a microcosm of Chinese American immigrants' occupational conditions in America.

Compared with Ha Jin, Wing Young Huie's photographs provide visual material for studying the occupational situation of Chinese American immigrants. Huie started his projects of photographing ethnic minorities, including Chinese American immigrants, in the neighborhoods of the Twin City area in Minnesota since 1993: "Frogtown" (1993-1995), "The University Avenue Project" (2006-2010), and the "Lake Street USA" (1997-2000). Being a Chinese American immigrant himself, he felt obliged to retell these often neglected people's stories. As he once stated, "One thing I've learned that's just true of being a hyphenated American, we all know what it's like not to be part of the majority. How you react to that is where you have all your differences" (Henning 03G). Outsiders rarely had a chance to become acquainted with the minority groups in Huie's urban neighborhoods. Thus, Huie's photographs give his silent neighbors a chance to speak for themselves. These photographs cover a wide socio-economic spectrum of immigrants from street vendors and students to gangsters, street performers, and the homeless. In Huie's photographs, all immigrants, both rich and poor, live dignified lives. Their lives contrast sharply to outsiders' stereotyped perception of these various ethnic groups. In 2001, Huie began his most ambitious and influential project "Looking for Asian America: An Ethnocentric Tour" (2001-2002). In this project, Huie expanded his view to the whole of North America. With his wife, Huie interviewed and photographed hundreds of Asian immigrants of different backgrounds and occupations. In 2005, Huie selected 105 photographs from this project and prepared an exhibition at the Tweed Museum of Art in University of Minnesota Duluth. In 2007, he published an album *Looking for Asian America: An Ethnocentric Tour by Wing Young Huie*, which contains most of the photographs and stories he recorded during that project.

Browsing through Huie's photographs, we encounter Chinese American immigrants in all sorts of occupations. By comparing Huie's photographs to Ha Jin's stories in *Flushing*, we can opportunely examine the occupational conditions of contemporary Chinese American immigrants in a rather comprehensive way. Huie's photographs provide direct visual evidence of their working environment. The immigrants' backstories in Ha Jin's book enrich the interpretations of Huie's photographs. Since it is impossible to introduce every occupation in this dissertation, the underrepresented and disadvantaged individuals emphasized by these two artists provide a useful example. By studying the literary and photographic texts of restaurant workers, street vendors, and kung fu masters, the reader has access to a general picture of their lives.

The restaurant business is one of the most common jobs for Chinese American immigrants, especially for newly arrived immigrants. According to Zhu Haifeng, on "Flushing's Main Street alone, there are...more than a hundred restaurants" (10). There are at least two reasons why work in Chinese restaurants is a popular job option for Chinese immigrants. First, Chinese restaurants are non-competitive with respect to other food-related businesses in America. They are protected by the special needs of Chinese immigrants. Thus, working in a Chinese restaurant is a relatively stable job. Second, Chinese restaurants usually do not require the employees to speak fluent English, because all the cuisine and menu are in Chinese. Most of their customers speak Chinese, too. Therefore, working in a Chinese restaurant quite naturally becomes many new immigrants' first option. However, they often have to face harsh working conditions and accept low wages.

In Ha Jin's story collection *A Good Fall*, we meet Chinese immigrants working in Chinese restaurants in Flushing. In the story "Shame", Professor Meng, an expert in American studies, comes to visit a number of U.S. universities with a delegation of Chinese educators. He decides to stay illegally in New York to make money and send it back to China. It is true that twenty years ago America had a higher average income than China. In Meng's words, "New York is so rich even the air smells fatty" (Ha, *A Good Fall* 123). However, illegal aliens like Meng have to maintain a low

profile and live a precarious life, because both the Chinese government and American immigration agencies are trying to track them down. The ubiquitous Chinese restaurants often provide temporary shelter and income for them. In Ha Jin's story, Meng finds a job in a Chinese restaurant in Flushing in no time. But he must start as a dishwasher since he has no previous experience. This job proves to be more laborious than his previous teaching position in China. Like other migrant workers in Chinese restaurants, Meng "came back around eleven at night" and was "bone-tired" every day (Ha, *A Good Fall* 130). In spite of the hardship, Meng receives \$ 4.60 per hour, which is still more than he would make in China (Ha, *A Good Fall* 130). In effect, many illegal Chinese immigrants are willing to endure the hard labor in Chinese restaurants. If they are capable and studious like Meng, they might be promoted or eventually find a better job. Nonetheless, as Ha Jin's narrator notes, illegal immigrants' biggest wish is amnesty and citizenship. Their illegal status could destroy all their chances in America at any moment.

Of course, there are many legal Chinese immigrants who work in Chinese restaurants as well. The narrator in the first story, "The Bane of the Internet", is a waitress. Although not an illegal immigrant, her plight revolves around her unbreakable tie to her family in China. In the story, the narrator's sister keeps asking for more money, believing as she does that life in America is easy and that the narrator is making a lot of money. But her sister in China cannot see how hard this job is: "I waitress ten hours a day, seven days a week. My legs are swollen when I punch out at ten p.m. I might never be able to buy an apartment at all" (Ha, *A Good Fall* 5). Many Chinese American immigrants work like this waitress. Their long-hours on the job do not bring in enough money to cover their daily needs, not to mention the needs of their families back home. They too have their American dreams. The narrator in the story wishes to leave her job and start some business of her "own—a snack bar or a nail salon or a video store" (Ha, *A Good Fall* 5). For these Chinese American immigrants, a restaurant job is often a stepping stone to financial independence or a



Figure 12. Wing Young Huie. “Ping, China Lantern, Carlsbad New Mexico”. *Looking for Asian America: An Ethnocentric Tour by Wing Young Huie*. Page 45. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2007.

transitional state to establishing their own business at some future time. Yet obligations to help their family in China present a constant problem.

While Ha Jin’s stories capture what it is like for Chinese immigrants to work in a restaurant, Wing Young Huie’s photographs provide us with a more immediate view of their working environment. In fact, Huie’s family has been in restaurant business in America for many years. He worked at his family’s café and restaurants as waiter, dishwasher, busboy, and cook. He understands the hardship in this business very well. On his ethnic tour to capture Asian Americans with his cameras, he met Ping who works in a restaurant called China Lantern in Carlsbad, New Mexico (Figure 12). Huie interviewed and photographed Ping.

Ping left his mother and younger brother for America when he was only eleven. He originally wanted to be an engineer (Huie, *Looking* 44). However, as an elder brother, he chose to work and send “money and engineering books back to his mother and brother” in China (Huie, *Looking* 44). He opened the restaurant China Lantern fifty years ago. Recently, he sold his ownership but still comes to cook everyday (Huie, *Looking* 44). The old man in Figure 12 is Ping. He wears a cook's



Figure 13. Wing Young Huie. “Ping’s Kitchen, China Lantern, Carlsbad New Mexico”. *Looking for Asian America: An Ethnocentric Tour by Wing Young Huie*. Page 46. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2007.

paper hat and an apron over his blue shirt. He is clearly the triumphal center of the photo. Behind him and somewhat out of focus, we see the large stainless-steel kitchen where he has been working for fifty years. Five fluorescent lights hang from the factory-like kitchen ceiling. Under the lights, there is a generous working space and a line of broad counters with a few bowls on them. Next to the counters, there are piles of clean bowls and plates on the shelf. Over the shelf, it is the stoves and sink. Figure 13 is a close-up of the cooking area.

In this photograph, we see various cooking utensils laying neatly on the stainless steel shelves and stove. From the pots to the stove, everything is clean and in order. Two large bowls full of half-cooked chicken stand by the woks, ready for incoming orders. The labels on the three soft drink bottles allude to Ping’s longtime habit of using them to make cooking sauces. After working day and night in this almost enclosed kitchen for fifty years, this kitchen and restaurant have already become an inseparable part of Ping’s life. When Huie interviewed Ping, this old cook was “legally blind, ... but once he steps into the kitchen he is spry. As he cleans the bean sprouts and puts out the

orders, methodically going about his familiar routine, the years seem to fall away” (Huie, *Looking* 44). Although he does not own the restaurant anymore, or does not have to work, coming here to cook revives him, makes him young again, and feeds his memory as well.

Street vendors represent the second type of occupation which we observe in both Ha Jin’s *A Good Fall* and Wing Young Huie’s photographs. Like the Chinese American immigrants working in the restaurant business, street vendors too would like to have their own business and be financially independent. Most street vendors cannot afford to rent a longterm location. Thus some busy street corners often become their storefront.

In the story “In the Crossfire”, Ha Jin introduces a street food vendor named Shulan. This story is essentially based on the stories that Ha Jin gathered in Flushing. He may have modified some of the details in composing the story, but the purpose of “In the Crossfire” is to portray in realistic prose a common migrant figure. Shulan is a middle-aged woman selling “scallion pancakes”, “sautéed rice noodles”, and “pork buns” to passersby at “the nameless snack joint on Main Street, near the subway station” in Flushing (Ha, *A Good Fall* 100). Chinese migrant street food vendors are good at making food that is familiar to them. The large Chinese population in Flushing also welcomes the taste of China. Shulan's working environment is simple and shabby: “That place was nothing but a flimsy lean-to, open to waves of heat and gusts of wind. In winter there was no need for a heater in the room because the stoves were hot and the pots sent up steam all the time, but in summer only a small fan whirled back and forth overhead” (Ha, *A Good Fall* 100-101). Having no money to rent a decent storefront, Shulan’s place is not completely sheltered from the outside, especially when weather turns bad. Nonetheless, “her rustic and energetic face” greatly impresses the main character Tian in the story. Following Tian, we learn more about Shulan’s family life: “Shulan’s husband had come to the States seven years before, but had disappeared a year later. Nobody was sure of his whereabouts ... By now Shulan was no longer troubled by his absence from home” (Ha, *A Good Fall* 101). Abandoned by her husband, Shulan



had to learn to be strong and independent at work and at home. In America, she has a daughter to bring up. In addition, she sends money to her parents in China every two months (Ha, *A Good Fall* 103). Her street food stand provides her with the means to support her family. Her tough face and optimistic words show that the hard life in America has not destroyed her hope.

In this story, Ha Jin nicely describes the Chinese migrant street food vendor's life verbally. Compared to the above fictional representation, Wing Young Huie's photograph of a migrant street food vendor gives us an equally vivid portrait of the street vendor's life, although now in a different medium.

Figure 14 is a photograph from Huie's University Avenue Project. University Avenue is a six-mile street in St. Paul, Minnesota. Immigrants from Asia, the Middle East, and other areas of the



Figure 14. Wing Young Huie. "Untitled". 2010. *University Avenue Project*. [www.wingyounghuie.com](http://www.wingyounghuie.com).

world live in the surrounding neighborhoods. In Huie's words, this is "one of the most diverse concentrations of international immigrants in the country" ("The Univeristy" B10). Huie spent three years photographing these ethnic groups, including students, blue-collar workers, homeless people, etc. His goal is to show "not only what is ignored, but also what is in plain sight and remains invisible" (Huie, "The Univeristy" B10). Clearly, the woman in Figure 14 belongs to this category.

In this untitled photograph, a middle-aged woman, apparently Chinese, sits on a broken camping chair inside a tent-like shelter. She is holding a roasting net above a self-made stove modified from an old bucket. There are a few plastic crates and buckets around her. The plastic bags hanging above her head and the red plastic table cloth in the foreground suggest that she is a street food vendor like Shulan in Ha Jin's story "In the Crossfire". She must have been wearing her blue coat for a long time because she can only close it with buttons instead of the broken zipper. The dark scarf over her head and the smoking stove help her stay warm in this half-open shelter. From these details in the photograph, we are able to deduce that she is living a difficult life. She cannot afford to rent building space. So she has built a flimsy tent to shelter herself from the cold and the weather. Although the utensils in her "kitchen" are old or simple, her eyes are calm and determined. She looks outside the tent and waits for her next customer. She knows how to survive.

The above photograph is a concrete display of a Chinese migrant street vendor and her working environment which we can only conjure up from words in Ha Jin's evocative story. Both artists, however, offer a moving representation of the street vendor's plight. Through Huie and Ha Jin's works, we are able to approach and recognize the dignity of these often forgotten individuals.

The third type of occupation that both Ha Jin and Wing Young Huie depict is kung fu masters, who teach this traditional Chinese fighting and body training skill in temples or kung fu schools. Their customers are interested in Chinese culture and kung fu. Many Chinese migrant kung fu masters rely on this skill to survive in America. In Ha Jin's story "A Good Fall", for example, the 28-year-old Ganchin is a monk who teaches kung fu in a Chinese-owned temple in Flushing. He



plans to return to China with the money he will earn when his labor contract with the temple ends. But a problem arises. The temple owner, Master Zong, refuses to pay Ganchin a penny for his services there. What is worse, when Ganchin is too sick to teach, Zong dismisses him and kidnaps him, in an attempt to put him on a plane back to China. Although Ganchin succeeds in escaping, he does not have any hope left to keep him going. He attempts suicide but miraculously survives. His suicide suddenly becomes big news in the Chinese communities across North America. Thanks to this notoriety, he receives help from his fellow Chinese Americans, who instill him with the courage to continue his life in America.

Even though this story has a happy ending, it still throws light on Chinese migrant kung fu masters' struggle in America. Apart from their kung fu skill, they do not possess any other advantages in the American job market. Like Ganchin in this story, low English proficiency and a monk's discipline, such as vegetarian diet and celibacy, greatly restricted his involvement in the American society. As Ganchin confesses, "I've never worked outside a temple and don't have any skill. I'm useless here" (Ha, *A Good Fall* 225). Having lived in this isolated temple for so long, Ganchin lost the ability to surmount Master Zong's exploitation and find another position in the American job market. He comes to realize that in this highly competitive capitalist society his only asset is his own body. Sucheng Chan addresses the difficulties many disadvantaged Chinese American immigrants face, stating that "the paradox inherent in transnationalism is that its celebratory stance camouflages underlying realities of immense exploitation, severe suffering, and gross violations of human rights" (xii). The attractive terms in the labor contract blinded Ganchin from discerning Master Zong's greediness and intentions. Ganchin is not the only victim. In this story, he remembers another monk named Ganping who also hanged himself because he too was not paid what was owed him (Ha, *A Good Fall* 229). To reverse their disadvantage, these kung fu masters need to change from within in order to adjust to the American society. Gradually, Ganchin starts to eat meat (Ha, *A Good Fall* 227) and free himself from the rules of being a monk (Ha, *A*

*Good Fall* 240). These changes lead to new opportunities, such as marrying Cindy, an American citizen of Chinese origin, and finding a job outside the temple. But we are not certain if this is a truly good change for Ganchin, since he has also abandoned his diet, religion, and former identity.

In Wing Young Huie's album *Looking for Asian America: An Ethnocentric Tour by Wing Young Huie*, the photographer also includes a few photographs of Chinese migrant kung fu masters. Speaking of Chinese kung fu masters, the first name coming to many people's mind is Bruce Lee. He was born in 1940 in San Francisco, California. He started as a successful child actor in Hong Kong where he appeared in numerous films (Russo 29). In his adolescent years in Hong Kong, he had the honor to learn Chinese martial arts from the "venerated Wing Chun kung fu master Ip Man<sup>1</sup>" and won a high school boxing championship (Russo 29). The practice of Wing Chun had built a solid foundation for Bruce Lee to create his own style in the future, Jeet Kune Do. In 1959 he returned to America and received a job teaching martial arts. For his good reputation, later he opened several of his own kung fu schools, for example, The Jun Fan Institute of Gung Fu in Seattle (1963), the branch of The Jun Fan Institute in Oakland (1964), and the Bruce Lee Martial Arts Studio in Los Angeles (1967) (Thomas 81-84). Yet it was his action movies that made Bruce Lee famous and an icon of Chinese kung fu masters. Wing Young Huie senses Bruce Lee's influence on Chinese American immigrants. Huie was even called "Bruce" by some Americans in the past (Huie, *Looking* 40). In this ethnocentric album, Huie includes several photographs of Bruce Lee, one of which is his tomb in Seattle (Figure 15).

In this photograph, the gravestones of Bruce Lee and Brandon Bruce Lee (Bruce Lee's son) stand next to a shrub in the foreground. On Bruce Lee's gravestone, below his portrait, name, and birth and death dates, there is a short line summarizing his life and contribution: "FOUNDER OF JEET KUNE DO". Behind and between the two gravestones, a young African American man is

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<sup>1</sup> Ip Man (叶问, 1893 – 1972) is the most famous martial artist of Wing Chun (咏春), which is a special style of martial arts in southern China.



Figure 15. Wing Young Huie. "Graves of Bruce Lee and Brandon Lee, Seattle, Washington". *Looking for Asian America: An Ethnocentric Tour by Wing Young Huie*. Page 41. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2007.

posing for a photograph alongside this cultural hero. Around him we see other gravestones, pine trees, and cemetery lawn. This African American is dressed in sportswear. Evidently, he is a fan of Chinese kung fu and of Bruce Lee. His serious and formal pose suggests his great admiration and respect to this kung fu master. This respect transcends ethnicity. Although Bruce Lee passed away nearly thirty years ago, the wreath and flower in front of the gravestones suggest that people still remember and pay homage to him.

Of course, Bruce Lee's legendary experience is not a path open to all Chinese migrant kung fu masters. The kung fu master Ganchin in Ha Jin's story is a good example. Wing Young Huie understands the uniqueness of Bruce Lee's experience as well. On the same album page, next to the



Figure 16. Wing Young Huie. “Buddhist Temple, Richmond, British Columbia”. *Looking for Asian America: An Ethnocentric Tour by Wing Young Huie*. Page 41. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2007.

photograph of Bruce Lee’s grave, Huie prints another smaller photograph of a buddhist monk (Figure 16).

This photograph is a monk’s profile shot from the side. The blurry image and the lights on the walls imply that the photograph was a snapshot taken at night. Although we can not see his face clearly, his bald head, dark robe, and profile show that he is probably a monk of Chinese ethnicity. The title of this photograph is “Buddhist Temple”. The dark pole between the two lights and the buddhist scriptures underneath the lights on the wall suggest that the building in front of the monk is a temple. The monk holds something long in his hands. Maybe he is going to burn incense inside the temple. This blurred photograph creates a mysterious atmosphere in which the monk is like a ghostly shadow without a face. We want to know more about this monk: is he a kung fu master like Bruce Lee, whose photograph is next to this one? What is his life like? Does he have to struggle like

Ganchin in Ha Jin's "A Good Fall"? We do not know the answers to these questions. Moreover, by blurring the monk's face, Huie turns him into an anonymous figure among the countless monks one meets in temples, someone to whom we rarely pay attention. This monk's life, the photographic technique suggests, is unremarkable and ordinary, compared to Bruce Lee's. He may not practice Chinese kung fu or act in films. He only follows his routine of a monk every day: meditation, meals, and chanting Buddhist scriptures. Yet, by displaying an unknown ghost-like monk and the famous kung fu master and movie star Bruce Lee side by side, Wing Young Huie reveals his compassion for ordinary Chinese American immigrants like this monk. This composition leads viewers to pay attention to the people whom we often neglect.

Among Chinese immigrants' various occupational backgrounds, there is a special type that is garnering more attention over the last twenty decades. I am speaking of the increasing presence of Chinese government official-turned-businessmen who used to work in the Chinese government and own companies at the same time. Starting with the 1990s, China initiated a fundamental reform of its economy. Before the 1990s, the Chinese government limited the number of private-owned business and had complete control of all large enterprises dealing with natural resources, energy, finance, and other essential industries. During the economic reform of the 1990s, the Chinese government began to encourage individuals to establish their own business or buy ownership from state-owned industries. In the process of privatization, many government officials ventured into privately owned business and became businessmen through bribery. Some even kept their government position at the same time. These people often accumulated big fortunes overnight through their power and connections in the government. Of course, the watchdog of Chinese government activities noticed these corrupt practices at all levels of government and started to investigate. In 1998, Zhu Rongji became the Premier of China. He was known for his determination to eliminate all corruption in the government. Fearing prosecution, many of these government official-turned-businessmen fled to America, Canada, and other countries. They form a new class of

immigrant in North America. In Qiu Xiaolong's fourth Inspector Chen novel, *A Case of Two Cities*, we have a closer look at how these special immigrants live in America.

The criminal Xing in *A Case of Two Cities* is a government official-turned-businessman. He used to be a high-ranking Party cadre in Fujian Province at the beginning of the economic reform. Taking advantage of his position in the government and of the new economic policy of privatization, he founded several commune factories and later privatized them by becoming the owner (Qiu 25). On the surface, his business seemed legal and legitimate, but those factories were only a disguise for his large smuggling enterprise, the major source of his wealth. By building "an elaborate network involving his Party connections at all government levels, from the very top in Beijing to the local cops and customs", Xing's smuggling business brought him over "a billion dollars—an amount equivalent to the province's annual gross domestic product" (Qiu 26). The central government noticed the extraordinary growth of Xing's wealth and kept a close watch over him. Since Xing had insiders in the central government, he secretly sneaked out of China to America with his mother before he could be prosecuted.

Materially speaking, Xing lived a luxurious life in America. The money he transferred to America allowed him to live in a high-class neighborhood in Los Angeles, Roland Height. Many other wealthy Chinese government officials and businessmen lived in this heavily guarded area as well. Those who were "in charge of government or state-owned business money have disappeared [in China], only to resurface here with their families in tow, with the missing money channeled into their personal bank accounts" (Qiu 155). These immigrants bought million-dollar houses with cash and hired bodyguards to protect them wherever they went.

However, these immigrants end up living as if they were being hunted most of the time. They have to monitor closely the investigation in both China and North America. In *A Case of Two Cities*, Xing lives next to a Chinese Politburo member's son, Little Tiger. Through Little Tiger, Xing receives updates on the investigation in China. On the American side, the CIA is also covertly

following Xing's activities. In order to elude the investigation and surveillance, Xing has several ways to protect himself.

First, he applies for "political asylum from the U.S., claiming to be the victim of a power struggle", and threatens "to reveal the criminal activities of high-ranking Party officials if he [i]s deported" (Qiu 27). This strategy offers him a shield against being prosecuted in China. In effect, the Chinese central government is afraid that the exposure of corruption among high-ranking officials would erode people's trust in the government and the Party. On the other hand, since Xing was also a government official in the past, by offering him political asylum, the American government could require that Xing provide confidential governmental information in exchange.

Second, Xing also has close connections with the local triads in Los Angeles. These triads are transnational secretive crime organizations that are involved in money laundering, human and drug trafficking, prostitution, and many other illegal activities. Their headquarters are based in southern China, Hong Kong, Canada, Australia, America and many other countries with a large Chinese population (Stuttaford 49). Some of the most famous triads are Triple Union Society (三合会), Heaven and Earth Society (天地会), and Black Dragons (黑龙) (Murray 16-17). Black Dragons is a triad formed by Chinese immigrants in Los Angeles. It recruits members from the local gangs of Asian background and conducts various crimes such as robbery, murder, theft (Katz). In *A Case of Two Cities*, although Qiu Xiaolong did not specify the names of the local triads, it is very possible that Xing was working with the Black Dragons. Xing hires them to provide protection or eliminate possible threats in the city. When Xing makes phone calls to China, he also uses "the local triad jargon" as codes to prevent surveillance (Qiu 266).

Third, Xing and his mother turned to religion as a refuge from their anxiety. In the novel, Xing and his mother go to a Chinese Temple every Thursday to donate money and ask the fate of the family (Qiu 171). They hope that the monks in the temple will enlighten them, especially about

how to aid Xing's brother to come to America without drawing Chinese government's attention. However, this desperate approach reveals Xing's trail and contacts in China. It leads to his eventual deportation at the end.

Xing's story reflects hundreds of Chinese government officials and businessmen's migrant lives in North America. They left China clandestinely with their family through investing their money in real estate, the stock market, and other ways of money laundering in foreign countries. In the past three years or so, Chinese government has toughened the process of investigating, prosecuting, and repatriating these immigrants. In March 2015, Chinese government sent the U.S. government a list of corrupt Chinese officials hiding in America and asked the U.S. to cooperate in bringing them to justice. According to *China Daily*, "more than 150 suspected corrupt Chinese officials were on the run in the US. Some had even obtained permanent residency permits, or 'green cards', in the US" by early 2014 (Zhang). The Chinese government hopes that U.S. government will help to crack down on the corruption in China and confiscate those official immigrants' ill-gotten assets overseas. Clearly this action will put the heat on these fugitives and make it tough for them to live in peace.

## 2.2. Home and Family

In the second part of Chapter 2, I will discuss the significance of home and family for Chinese immigrants in North America from three different perspectives. The first focuses on the meaning of Chinatown to Chinese immigrants in North America. Here I will compare Fae Myenne Ng's novel *Bone* with Wayson Choy's *The Jade Peony* in order to explore the differences between Chinatowns in San Francisco and in Vancouver. In addition to these two literary works, I will also compare the photographs of New York Chinatown by George Grantham Bain and Benjamin Chinn's San Francisco Chinatown. Bain's photographs, which represent an outsider's point of view, are from the 1900s to the 1930s, while Chinn's, capturing an insider's perspective, are from the late 1940s to the



1950s. The second perspective on home and family is the significance of family to Chinese immigrants. I will first examine Chinese immigrants' complex family relationship in Frank Chin's play *The Year of the Dragon*. Next I will focus on a special type of Chinese migrant family, the "paper" immigrants' family<sup>2</sup> as dramatized in Fae Myenne Ng's second novel *Steer toward Rock*. The third perspective is a distillation of the previous two discussions and will highlight the theme of Chinese immigrants' homelessness in North America. Here, the literary texts are Ying Chen's *Les Lettres chinoises* and *Quatre Mille Marches: Un Rêve Chinois*, which offer insights into Chinese immigrants' reaction to their homeless state.

I will begin with what Chinatown means to Chinese immigrants in Fae Myenne Ng's novel *Bone*. When talking about Chinatown, outsiders tend to consider it as the home of Chinese immigrants and a miniature of China. Yet, in the minds of its residents, this perspective oversimplifies matters. If we compare Chinatown to the settings in a novel, in Dalia Kandiyoti's words, this place "is not simply an enabler of narrative but a constitutive element shaping the genre, plot, character, and cultural and racial politics of the narratives" (10). In other words, Chinatown actually helps to form the Chinese immigrants in North America in every aspect: history, culture, politics, etc. The place has become a character itself in both the real and the literary world. As a city within a city, it is a "minutely specialized and highly integrated" community; at the same time it affords "a rich, intense, and variegated life to its members" (Wirth 38). Since the late nineteenth century, both outsiders and its residents have commented on the complex relationship between Chinatown and Chinese immigrants. In the past, the Chinatown residents often lost their voice in the domineering North American society. Over time and with the rise of Chinese immigrants' economic and social status, Chinatown residents regain their voice and an ethnic literature

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<sup>2</sup> "Paper" immigrants entered the country through fabricating their immigration documents to prove that they were the sons or family members of the Chinese immigrants living in America.

developed offering different versions of Chinatown. Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* is an important example.

What distinguishes *Bone* from other literary works about Chinatown is Ng's focus on Chinatown's complex significance to Chinese immigrants. In this novel, San Francisco's Chinatown is not a "dream of racial-cultural exotica" or an "idealized embodiment of racial-political solidarity" in tourists' mind (Chang, "Chinese" 91). Rather in this closely connected community, Chinese immigrants struggled to repair their broken families and identity. Ng depicts how a tourist and a local resident view Chinatown differently:

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. (*Bone* 144-45)

Leila, the narrator in *Bone*, points out that what tourists see in Chinatown is only the external surface. The life behind these colorful streets remains beyond the outsider's reach. Chinatown provides Chinese immigrants a shelter but also hinders their full articulation. Leila's narration of her family history takes readers into Chinese immigrants' real lives in Chinatown.

The major issue in this novel is Ona's suicide. She was the middle daughter in the family. Following the oldest daughter Leila's narration, readers try to understand why Ona jumped from the thirteenth floor of the Nam Ping Yuen Building in San Francisco's Chinatown. Mah, the mother in the family, once was a seamstress and has now opened a Baby Store. She blames Ona's death on Nina, the youngest daughter, and Leila (Ng, *Bone* 25). Leon, the stepfather in this family, entered America as a paper son of Grandpa Leong. He believes that his bad luck caused Ona's death, because he failed to keep his promise to send Grandpa Leong's bones back to China. On the other hand, Nina thinks it was their parents' pressure that led to Ona's death. Even in the end, readers do

not have a clear idea as to what exactly brought about Ona's suicide. However, this novel reflects the meaning of Chinatown had for the first and second generations of Chinese immigrants. Because of the "anti-Chinese laws, public policy, social practices, and imperatives of local and global capitalist development" (Chang, "Chinese" 96), the San Francisco Chinatown in *Bone* is a broken home which the residents struggle to piece back together. While the close relationships inside the community and their old memories become Chinatown residents' spiritual support.

First of all, Chinatown serves as "home" for Chinese immigrants, but it is only a broken one. As discussed above, when Chinese immigrants decided to settle down in Chinatown, they were looking for a place to live in concord in a foreign land. However, most Chinese immigrants still have families back home in China. For the older generation in particular, their home in Chinatown can never adequately substitute their native land. In addition, the children born in Chinatown inevitably undergo some form of assimilation and acculturation. This added tension further destabilizes family life in Chinatown. In essence, Chinatown might be called a broken home which Chinese immigrants struggle to repair. The Leong/Fus family in *Bone* is an exemplar of Chinatown. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator introduces her "failed family" to the readers (Ng, *Bone* 3): Leila prefers to stay outside Salmon Alley, Chinatown; the stepfather Leon goes to sea for most of the year and stays in a hotel when he comes back; Nina escapes to New York far away from San Francisco; Ona committed suicide in Chinatown; although Mah lives in Chinatown, all her time is devoted to her sewing and labor and not to her family. The stepfather Leon understands what is holding this cracked home together. He tells Leila, "it's time that makes a family, not just blood" (Ng, *Bone* 3). The "time" here means their shared past in Chinatown. This "time" connects these immigrants, and Chinatown is its milieu.

To investigate further the question as to why Chinatown is Chinese immigrants' broken home, we need to differentiate between first and second generations. As for the former, a discriminative social environment and harsh labor exploitation helped to confine them within the boundaries of

Chinatown. Apart from the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the new American Immigration Act in 1924 specifically excluded “Chinese women from the group of immigrants and ma[de] it impossible for Chinese men to immigrate unless they could prove that their fathers were born in the U.S.” (Goellnicht 304). It was in the context of this historical background that Leon entered America as a paper son in 1942, one year before the American Immigration Act was repealed (Goellnicht 304). The population of San Francisco’s Chinatown at that time was still largely a bachelor society. Although Leon and Mah were married, he knew she married him for the green card (Ng, *Bone* 182). Leon hoped that through marriage he would be able to settle down permanently in Chinatown. Yet their marriage is not built on love but on the need to survive.

Of course this marriage is far from being stable. Tommie Hom, the wealthy sewing shop owner, won Mah’s favor, because he could provide better care for the family than Leon. Compared with Hom, Leon belongs to a disadvantaged group. Due to his low English proficiency, fake identity, and old age, his job options are limited to menial and unskilled types within Chinatown. His experience is radically different from what he heard about the “Gold Mountain” before he came to America. The Chinatown in the “Gold Mountain” turns Leon into an exploitable laborer and a husband in a “green hat”<sup>3</sup>. Instead of a cozy home and stable job, Leon finds only shame and toil in Chinatown. To escape from them, he chooses to be a sea merchant and stays away from Chinatown.

In addition to the loss of family and occupation, Leon also lost Grandpa Leong’s bones in Chinatown. Fae Myenne Ng explains the significance of shipping these Chinese immigrants’ bones back to China and the choice of the title for her novel. It is “the tradition among earlier immigrants who, believing true rest came from being buried in Chinese soil, arranged for their bones to be transported back to China for burial. Our bones are our lasting element and *Bone* (the novel) speaks to what lasts” (qtd. in Atwater 93). In other words, this tradition of burying the bones of kin in

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<sup>3</sup> “Wearing a green hat” is a Chinese traditional idiom. If a man is referred as “wearing a green hat”, that means his wife is having an affair with another man.

Chinese soil symbolizes a return to their roots. In the novel, as a result of the reconstruction of the early immigrants' graveyards in Chinatown, Grandpa Leong's bones were lost. This renovation in Chinatown reflected early immigrants' loss of roots and connections to the past. Yet Leon blames the loss of Grandpa Leong's bones all on himself and sets out to find them. Leila understands Leon's purpose: "This wasn't all about Grandpa Leong. Leon was looking for a part of his own lost life" (Ng, *Bone* 88). Those bones serves as a link to Leon's past as well. He first came to Chinatown as Grandpa Leong's paper son. In exchange, Leon had to give up his previous name, family, and identity. If these bones were lost, a part of Leon was lost, too. In effect, Leon ends up sacrificing a great deal in Chinatown.

Mah, a first generation Chinese immigrant, also has a tough life in Chinatown. Chinatown is not a cozy home for her but a grinding sweatshop. In order to finish the shop owner Tommie Hom's large workload, Mah has to take her work home and ask her daughters to sew with her at night. Lisa Lowe writes that "the imperatives of capitalist development turn Chinatown's private spaces into annexes of gendered, racialized labor exploitation" (168). The wealthy merchants in Chinatown such as Hom took advantage of these racialized female migrant laborers, because they knew that these women were regularly excluded from the American labor market. So these sweatshop women were unable to escape from the life-destroying capitalist system. Min Zhou uses "ethnic enclave economy theory" to explain this labor relation in Chinatown:

it draws on racial-cultural bonds to form an alternative enclave economy comprised of co-ethnic labor and business networks, concentrated in the field of small business (Chinese small business owners employing Chinese employees). Shared race and culture animate economic trust and goodwill between employers and employees—co-ethnic cooperation—providing an alternative path to upward mobility for both workers and bosses. (qtd. Chang, "Chinese" 99)

This seemingly win-win economy mode does help Hom win Mah's trust in *Bone*. Hom even becomes Mah's "step-husband" when Leon goes to sea. However, this "co-ethnic cooperation" proves to be a cover for the co-ethnic exploitation. Hom uses Mah's trust to increase her workload

and his own wealth. Even though Mah realizes she is being exploited, she is not able to change the situation, because she needs this job to survive in Chinatown. In fact, not only this job, her marriages with Lyman Fu (Mah's first husband) and Leon were both for survival. As Mah says, "In those days, we don't have a choice" (Ng, *Bone* 186). These two marriages were another form of labor contract. She exchanged her youth, labor, and loyalty for a stable life in Chinatown.

Compared with the older generation, younger Chinese immigrants often consider Chinatown a prison built on old Chinese customs and traditions. It impedes their assimilation into American culture and society. Some wish to escape from Chinatown's confinement and get up the courage to leave. Some search for a balance between the Chinese and American way of life. Sau-ling Wong points out that these younger generation immigrants need to choose between being "ghettoized spiritually and/or physically, confined to the survival mode" or "denouncing one's origins" (44). Neither alternatives are very appealing. These younger immigrants stand on the threshold of Chinatown yet feel deserted by both sides.

In Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*, the three daughters express different attitudes towards Chinatown. Nina is the most detached of the three. To her, Chinatown is "too depressing", and "the life's hard down there" (Ng, *Bone* 26). She hates to live in an old world milieu like her parents; while they do not "want to come into" her world outside the Chinatown (Ng, *Bone* 33). To solve this problem, Nina chooses to live in New York, far away from the conflicts and unhappiness in Chinatown.

Ona is a victim of the multiple pressures originating in both Chinatown and American society. Martha J. Cutter summarizes Ona's characteristics as follows: in the "old-world" patriarchal view, Ona is "a silent and passive possession"; and in the "new-world" view, she is "a self-defined, 'American' individual"; she is both "a sweet daughter, counting out kisses for her father, but also a salty sailor, sailing the world like Leon" (595). She tries to meet the expectations from both Chinatown and American society. However, as Ng writes, "in the family, in Chinatown. Ona was the middle girl and she felt stuck in the middle of all the trouble" (*Bone* 139).

Ona is under the pressure from her family, especially because of her relationship with Osvaldo. In the patriarchal Chinatown, Leon's authority as a father requires Ona to obey him and be his dutiful Chinese daughter. On the other hand, the American culture also teaches Ona to chase after her love regardless of Luciano's betrayal to Ona's family. The two sides are tearing Ona apart. This conflict reflects the pressures the second generation have to live with. Inside Chinatown, she is expected to maintain the "pure, illusory Chineseness" passed down from her elders (Goellnicht 320). Outside Chinatown, she "never felt comfortable, even with the Chinese crowd that Osvaldo hung around with; she never felt like she fit in" (Ng, *Bone* 173). Clearly, Ona is unable to reconcile between American culture and Chinatown's insular traditions. In *The Ghetto*, Louis Wirth illustrates these younger immigrants' situation: "On the one hand there is the strange and fascinating world of man; on the other, the restricted sectarianism of a little group into which he happened to be born, of neither of which he is fully a member" (290). In *Bone*, Ona oscillated between these two forces until she could no longer mediate between them. Finally, she jumped from the Nam Ping Yuen, a residence building in Chinatown. The name "Nam Ping Yuen" (南平园) literally means "South Peaceful Gardens". This name suggests a sense of irony on the author's part. Chinatown is far from being a peaceful home.

Different from her younger sisters, Leila sees Chinatown as a fragmented community in which she herself must bridge the gaps. It is very meaningful for her to be a community relation specialist at a school in Chinatown. Her job is about "being the bridge between classroom teacher and the parents" (Ng, *Bone* 16). Most of Leila's students are new immigrants. They need an experienced Chinese-speaking communicator like Leila to conduct the home visits. The purpose of these visits is "about getting the parents involved" in their children's education (Ng, *Bone* 16). There were gaps that Leila tries to bridge during her routine visits. One is between the school and the Chinese migrant parents, because the latter believe that education is solely the school's responsibility. The second gap is within these Chinese migrant families — namely, the conflict

between making a living in Chinatown and educating their children. In fact, Chinatown is composed of these migrant families. Therefore, Leila's job reflects her strong sense of responsibility to the Chinatown community. This is also exemplified in her role at home. There, too, she serves as a link and communicator between Mah and Leon, between Nina and Mah. In her eyes, every family in Chinatown is the same: "nothing's changed about making a life or raising kids. Everything is hard" (Ng, *Bone* 17). Nonetheless, Leila still feels emotionally at home in Chinatown.

What makes Leila feel at home is Chinatown's history. It draws her closer to her ancestors. She likes the "old-style" — The Universal Cafe (Ng, *Bone* 10). She feels "comfortable" and "cocoon-safe" when she hears "the old alley sounds— Old Mr. Lim's cough... the long foghorn, the rumble of Ernie Chang's Camaro" (Ng, *Bone* 129). These familiar sights and sounds give Leila a sense of time standing still. This safe and soothing feeling comes from Leila's understanding of her previous generation's struggle: "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" (Ng, *Bone* 36). She understands that the older generation has sacrificed their youth, labor, marriage, even identity to give her generation a better life. Therefore she never gives up trying to bridge the gaps inside Chinatown, because, in any case, Chinatown is always her home (Ng, *Bone* 51).

Chinatown not only holds an important position in Leila's life, it also does for Nina, the daughter most distant from her family. She dislikes being confined in Chinatown, but she still appreciates Chinese culture and ancestry. She quits her air hostess job and becomes a guide for tours to China. She even falls in love with a Chinese man in China. These details reveal Nina's eagerness to know about her culture and ancestry.

To Leon, Chinatown harbors not only his guilt and sadness, but all his indelible memory. Leila understands Leon's indulgence in his memories of Chinatown. At one point she says, "Remembering the past gives power to the present. Memories do add up. Our memories can't bring Grandpa Leong or Ona back, but they count to keep them from becoming strangers" (Ng, *Bone*



88-89). Chinatown is like a box that contains Leon's past. The memories inside the box help to make Leon who he is and keep him alive in the present. This explains why Leon preserves all his documents and letters: because they "marked his time... and... his endurance" (Ng, *Bone* 58). Likewise, Leon has the habit of collecting broken electronic parts in Chinatown and putting them back together. This hobby may symbolize Leon's desire to piece together his broken memory and past. These deserted electronic parts are identical to Leon's memory, which is scattered all over Chinatown. Thus, although Chinatown had robbed so much from Leon, it remains his harbor no matter how far he escapes from it at sea.

Apart from labor exploitation, Chinatown also provides communal support and comfort to Mah. The residents in Chinatown form a very close community. They know each other and come to each other's aid whenever needed. In *Bone*, after Ona's suicide, all the neighbors and seamstress at the sewing shop come to visit immediately. "Everyone was sorry. They all wanted to know what they could do for" the family (Ng, *Bone* 113). As Louis Wirth remarks, the ghetto-like life in Chinatown, although "lacks in breath of horizon, ... makes up in depth of emotion, in strength of familial and communal ties, and in attachment to tradition, form, and sentiment" (222). The shared tradition and emotion connects each individual in Chinatown and helps the painful residents to survive and recover.

To sum up, Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* reveals the significance Chinatown has for different Chinese immigrants. This insider's view shows a sad and touching side of the locale. In Chinatown, the residents worked away their youth, lived separately from their spouses and families, lost the freedom to live outside its invisible boundary and more importantly their identity. Even so, Chinatown is still a site of memory for them, with a strong cultural pull. It also offers emotional and spiritual comfort as a home. What is more, thanks to the younger generation's efforts, the old Chinatown is moving forward. As Dalia Kandiyoti notes, "there is no such thing as ... a unified, stable place" (11). Chinatown is breaking down the original boundaries in geography and in

Chinese immigrants' minds. At the end of *Bone*, Leon says "The heart never travels" (Ng 193). His words point out a future path for Chinatown. No matter how the situation changes, Chinese immigrants only need to hold on to what really matters to them. Their heart will guide them and the future of Chinatown as well. Then what is in Chinese immigrants' heart? Perhaps the title of the novel— *Bone*— is the answer.

In Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*, we have a glimpse of San Francisco Chinatown and its significance to Chinese immigrants in America. However, the Chinese name used for San Francisco by early Chinese immigrants — "Gum Saan" (Gold Mountain) did not refer to this specific city, but to a large area in both America and Canada where prospectors rushed for gold in the early and mid-1800s (Lim 15). This area included Vancouver Island in British Columbia. It was Chinese immigrants' "first extensively settled area" in Canada and was the origin of the Vancouver Chinatown (Lim 15). According to Imogene L. Lim, "the Fraser River gold rush brought the first conspicuous numbers of Chinese to 'Canada'" in 1858 (16). Some came from the same villages of Sanyi and Siyi in Guangdong Province as those who settled in San Francisco. Some migrated there from California "where anti-Chinese feeling was then growing" (Chlumecká 3). Among the initial wave of Chinese immigrants, most were laborers in gold mines. Others started various service businesses such as laundries and restaurants around the mines.

Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Chinese immigrants made enormous contributions to the development of the West in Canada: "in coal mining; in the construction of the Cariboo Wagon Road; in public works; in stringing telegraph wire for Western Union; and, of course, in building the Canadian Pacific Railway" (Lim 16). Along with these achievements, these immigrants also built various sized Chinatowns on the periphery of the cities. Yet these Chinatowns "declined in 1920s and 1930s, leaving the cities of Victoria and Vancouver as the major centers of Chinese occupation in British Columbia" (Lim 16-17). Vancouver in its early days was a "rough-and-tumble logging town" (Lim 21). Many Chinese immigrants worked in logging camps outside

the city. Since the 1880s, these Chinese immigrants started to create the Vancouver Chinatown from the intersection of Carrall and Pender Streets (Lim 21). Imogene L. Lim describes its layout as follows:

the early Chinatown did expand beyond the intersection of Carrall and Pender Streets—to the west to Shanghai and Canton Alleys, and to the east along Pender Street. It was basically a three- by one-block zone... The blocks were sectioned into twenty-five-foot lots, whose narrow three- and four-story buildings gave the area part of its distinctive appearance. (22)

It was within this small residential area that Chinese Canadian immigrants established their home and community.

Similar to Ng's representation of San Francisco Chinatown in *Bone*, Chinese Canadian writer Wayson Choy recounts his early memories of Vancouver Chinatown in his first novel *The Jade Peony* (1995). Through the accounts of three Chinese Canadian children, Choy writes a complex "oral" history of Vancouver Chinatown from the 1930s to early 1940s. Since Choy grew up in Vancouver Chinatown, this novel reveals what was often hidden or forgotten in the cultural history of Canada. This book is significant to Choy as well. He tells Chan during an interview that "the book turned on me and let me see for the first time what Chinatown meant" (qtd. in Chlumecká 33). When he was preparing and writing the book, he began to delve deeply into Vancouver Chinatown's past: the dark ghetto life, the racism against Chinese immigrants, its relationships to China, America, Britain, and Canada. All these greatly influenced Chinese Canadian immigrants' lives and Vancouver Chinatown's development.

*The Jade Peony* is composed of three parts. In each part, one of the three children in this Chinese Canadian family retell what they observed and heard in Vancouver Chinatown. The three narrators are Jook-Liang (the only daughter), Jung-Sum (the second brother), and Sek-Lung (the youngest brother and nicknamed Sekky). Each part progressively involves the children in the negotiations between Chinatown and Canada, China, and even the globe. Two important historical events take place in the background. First, the Great Depression in America

(1929-1939) quickly embraced Canada as well. Economic recession forced thousands of people out of jobs, reducing them to hunger. Vancouver's Chinatown felt the effects of this crisis.

Second, almost immediately after the Depression, in 1939, the World War Two broke out. In the battlefield of Asia, Japan invaded China. As a matter of fact, in Canada, "since 1937, the Chinese community had been following events in China closely as Imperial Japanese armed forces gradually occupied the Northeast (Manchuria) and moved into Central and Southern China. Guangdong, the region in Southern China that produced the most immigrants, was eventually occupied" (Lee, "Engaging" 26). It is against these two historical phenomena that the three children in *The Jade Peony* witness the shipment of Chinese old-timers' bones back to China. They dream of becoming Hollywood movie stars, while also relating their experiences in attending Chinese and English schools, playing war games after school, exploring the Japanese community next to Chinatown. Through all this, we see them searching for their identity. This book weaves together history, the imaginative lives of three children and Choy's personal experiences. It produces a Chinatown that was "in the process of modification and transformation" (Davis, "Chinatown" 136).

By comparing with the San Francisco Chinatown of Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* with Choy's Vancouver Chinatown in *The Jade Peony*, we are able to discover a number of similarities. The Chinese immigrants in Canada also experienced the unfair treatment due to discriminative laws and policies. Imogene L. Lim lists "numerous provincial and federal legislative bills that limited and restricted Chinese immigration and employment opportunities, specifically, the Franchise Act of 1885; the head tax of 1885, 1901, and 1904 (\$50, \$100, and \$500, respectively); and the Immigration Act of 1923" (17). The Franchise Act of 1885 denied Chinese immigrants' voting rights until the 1960s. The 1923 Immigration Act, also known as the Chinese Exclusion Act, excluded "anyone of Chinese descent except merchants and students" from entering the country (Lee, "Engaging" 21). This act was not annulled until 1947, because China had participated the

Second World War and fought against Japan, which was also the enemy of Canada (Roy 148), and hundreds of Canadian-born Chinese “volunteered to join the military service to fight for Canada” (Lee, *Chinese Americans* 40). In *The Jade Peony*, Choy shows how the 1923 Exclusion Act impacted Chinese immigrants in Canada:

on July 1st the Dominion of Canada passed the Chinese Exclusion Act and shut down all ordinary bachelor-man traffic between Canada and China, shut off any women from arriving, and divided families. Poverty-stricken bachelor-men were left alone in Gold Mountain, with only a few dollars left to send back to China every month, and never enough dollars to buy passage home. Dozens went mad; many killed themselves. The Chinatown Chinese call July 1st, the day celebrating the birth of Canada, the Day of Shame. (17)

What Choy describes actually happened. According to David Lai, this act was so effective in reducing the Chinese population that only twelve people were admitted to Canada during the exclusion years (67). Thus, from the 1920s through the 1940s the Vancouver Chinatown was full of broken families like those in San Francisco’s Chinatown. Likewise, due to these “restrictive immigration policies and the Chinese tradition that restricted women to the ancestral home”, Vancouver Chinatown was predominantly a bachelor society, too (Lim 17).

However, the Vancouver Chinatown in Choy’s *The Jade Peony* has its unique traits that distinguish it from San Francisco’s Chinatown. One of the major reasons is the “intercultural state” in Canada (Davis, “Interweaving” 279). In an interview with Rocío G. Davis, Choy differentiates Canada’s “intercultural” approach from the “multicultural” paradigm practiced in the U.S.. According to Choy, multiculturalism presumes that “we get stuck in a concept or idea that is truthful to describe a certain time and place, and then we think that it must be like that forever”; it also suggests that “we are divided by our cultures and that we can coexist” (Davis, “Interweaving” 279). Yet what happened in Choy’s version of Vancouver Chinatown is that “the young and the people who may be at the edges of their culture start ‘interculturally’ exchanging things... This is regenerating a new kind of cultural interactivity... That ... is not multicultural but intercultural” (Davis, “Interweaving” 279-80). Thus, we see the three children narrators

mixing with other ethnic groups in all kinds of situations in Choy's Vancouver Chinatown; while Ng's *Bone* recounts a life of ethnic segregation. This Vancouver Chinatown is subject to plural negotiation of its borders with the rich multiethnic context in Canada. Avtar Brah explains these borders' relation to diaspora sites like Vancouver Chinatown as:

arbitrary dividing lines that are simultaneously social, cultural, and psychic; territories to be patrolled against those whom they construct as outsiders, aliens, the Others; forms of demarcation where the very act of prohibition inscribes transgression; zones where fear of the Other is the fear of the self; places where claims to ownership — claims to “mine”, “yours”, and “theirs”— are staked out, contested, defended, and fought over. (198)

As they did in the San Francisco Chinatown, Chinese immigrants constructed Vancouver Chinatown to protect themselves from outsiders, as Brah states above. Yet, the complex ethnic composition, the colonial history, and the turbulent war and depression era in Canada made Vancouver Chinatown's borders more unstable and porous than those of the San Francisco Chinatown. A good example of interculturality in Choy's *The Jade Peony* occurs in the cinema where “grown-up white people clapped every time they saw President Roosevelt, Chinatown people booed every time they saw the Japanese, and children cheered every time Mighty Mouse showed up” (46). This scene depicts the kind of exchanges that occurred in Choy's Vancouver Chinatown. Interculturality is an inseparable part of Vancouver Chinatown. I would like to group this intercultural exchange into four components: Chinese, America, Britain, and Canada. In the next part, I will discuss how each component contributes to the Vancouver Chinatown in Wayson Choy's *The Jade Peony*.

First, the Chinese component is fundamental to the construction of Vancouver Chinatown in *The Jade Peony*. A shared Chinese ethnic background binds the residents together like a family. However this component is not homogenous. There are at least two parts within the Chinese component: the old China and the modern China.

The old China is Chinese immigrants' cultural root in Vancouver Chinatown. It is represented by "the polyphonous dialects and verbal modes of address which characterize its social hierarchies; the gossip, folk tales, and superstition which colour its streets and alleys" (Beneventi 137). In *The Jade Peony*, Poh-Poh, the oldest member in the family, was "the arbitrator of the old ways" (Choy 14). She tells ancient Chinese stories to her grandchildren and takes them to watch Chinese Operas in Canton Alley in Chinatown (Choy 15). She believes strongly in the value of tradition and tries to pass it on to the younger generation. Her attitude to them also follows "the old ways": boys are better than girls. More than once she remarks that "A girl-child is *mo yung*— useless"(32).

In addition, Poh-Poh speaks many Chinese dialects and uses them with different listeners:

Poh-Poh spoke her Sze-yup, Four County village dialect, to me and Jung, but not always to Kiam, the First Son. With him, she spoke Cantonese and a little Mandarin... Whenever Stepmother was around, Poh-Poh used another but similar village dialect, in a more clipped fashion, as many adults do when they think you might be the village fool, too worthless or too young, or not from their district. (Choy 15-16)

Since Kiam is the only child born in China, to him Poh-Poh uses a dialect different from the ones she uses with Liang and Jung. For the stepmother was bought into the family and has a lower status than Poh-Poh, Poh-Poh uses a specific speech mode to express her power and position in the family. She learned this from her "thirty-five years of survival in China" (Choy 16). Lynne Van Luven writes that "as autocratic matriarch in *The Jade Peony*, Poh-Poh decrees the order of life in the family" (265). Her implementation of Chinese tradition and her mastery of various dialects become Poh-Poh's methods of managing this Chinese Canadian family. Her methods symbolize the Old Chinese component in the construction of Vancouver Chinatown.

In addition to old China, the modern China is another component that helps Chinese immigrants constitute the Vancouver Chinatown. In *The Jade Peony*, the narrators' father is a speaker for modern China. He openly defies Poh-Poh who used old Chinese ideology to educate

the children. For example, Poh-Poh tells Jung-Sum that she will “die soon”, because she gave “a good piece of lucky jade” to “Old Wong Suk” (Choy 124). Father immediately cuts her short: “Stop all this *die* nonsense... Your old ways are not the new ways. Your grandchildren have to live the new ways” (Choy 124). Following the “new ways”, Father is very concerned about the wars in China and participates actively in the fundraising in Vancouver Chinatown. Although far from China, Father leads his children to experience the wars through radio broadcasts and his own explanation. With Third Uncle, Father writes “the script of a Chinese Opera to raise Save China War Bonds” (Choy 196). Father’s patriotic action influences his children. They play a war game called “ENEMIES OF FREE CHINA” and imitate the battle scenes with toy planes and tanks. When they grow a little older, the boys are eager to join the army and fight against the Japanese invaders. What is more, Father encourages his children to attend Chinese school and learn Mandarin. In his mind, Mandarin will be the official language of new China. It symbolizes “the new ways” in contrast to Poh-Poh’s Cantonese and dialects, which are a symbol of “the old ways” (Choy 147).

Father is not the only one who worries about the wars in modern China. The whole Vancouver Chinatown is involved. We see “Buy War Bonds posters hanging in Chinatown store windows” (Choy 133). Men like Gee Sook “gave away... so much of his time at the Free China fundraisers” (Choy 100). Women like Stepmother learn to “knit socks for the soldiers in China” (Choy 133). This patriotic atmosphere unites and consolidates the Vancouver Chinatown during the war period. On the other hand, we observe that “the Chinese Republic’s authority among overseas Chinese communities was justified through the association between ethnicity and nationhood” (Lee, “Engaging” 18). It intended to connect the individuals in Chinatown to their common nationhood and ensure conformity and unity in Vancouver Chinatown.

The old China and modern China are not absolutely in conflict in Vancouver Chinatown. In fact, the two components together have formed many communal organizations, for instance the



Anglican Vancouver Chinese Mission and the Tong Association in *The Jade Peony*. Their cooperation strengthens the ties within the Chinese community. The Anglican Vancouver Chinese Mission gives away free books and magazines to children in Vancouver Chinatown (Choy 91). The Tong Associate provides not only clothes and second-hand goods to the Chinatown residents but also rooms in boarding houses for bachelor-men (Choy 91, 107). It even helps parentless Jung-Sum find his new family (Choy 82). Apart from these organizations, almost everyone in Chinatown is ready to help overcome the difficulties caused by the Depression in Canada. Gee Sook “gave generously of his cleaning and tailoring services... at the lowest fees... to those poorer families ... who were always making over old clothes” (Choy 95). Third Uncle offers odd jobs to Kiam at his warehouse (Choy 98). In short, all these organizations and warm-hearted individuals form a network of solidarity in Vancouver Chinatown. They act as “a lifeboat that enables the survival — physical or mental — of many” (Lorre 75).

The second component that helps construct Wayson Choy’s Vancouver Chinatown is American culture. Although America and Canada are two independent countries, American culture, especially its popular culture, invades Canada and much of the Western world. The most conspicuous American influence in Vancouver Chinatown is the Hollywood movies. As the epitome of American popular culture, Hollywood movies have a huge impact on the younger generation in Chinatown without them even knowing it. In *The Jade Peony*, Shirley Temple is Jook-Liang’s favorite movie star. She imitates Shirley Temple’s dress, hair, and dance and dreams of becoming a Chinese Shirley Temple. In Jook-Liang’s mind, Shirley Temple is an icon displaying a free spirit and beauty; she is loved by everyone in the movies (Choy 40). This contrasts with Poh-Poh’s dislike for girls. So, Shirley Temple means equality to Jook-Liang as well. Similarly, Jung-Sum aspires to be a cowboy, another Hollywood image of American bravery and boldness. Kiam, on the other hand, wants to be Charlie Chan, another Hollywood fictional character. Although this Chinese American detective mirrors the Western stereotypes of

Chinese immigrants, it still has a huge impact on the younger generation. Thus, these symbols of American culture, Shirley Temple and Charlie Chan, set up the standards of beauty, freedom, equality, bravery, and wisdom for many young Chinese immigrants in Vancouver Chinatown. However, as a supporter of Old Chinese culture, Poh-Poh calls her grandchildren's passion for American culture "*All stupid foolish!*" (Choy 40). This generates a sharp confrontation between Chinese tradition and American Hollywood fantasy in these young Chinese immigrants' lives in Vancouver Chinatown.

The third component that influences the composition of Vancouver Chinatown comes from Britain. Although Canada became independent in 1867, it is still a member of the British Commonwealth. Politically, Britain still possesses power over Canada. In *The Jade Peony*, we notice pervasive references to Canada's status as a former British colony. No doubt, Miss Doyle at Strathcona school is a speaker for the British component. Her job is to teach the King's English to her migrant students. All three narrators in the novel attend her language class: "Day after day, we absorbed her enunciated syllables, the syllables of a King and Queen. Without our fully realizing what was happening, our English vocabulary multiplied and blossomed" (Choy 177). Teaching language is always an important tool for colonizers. The colonizers' language, as Homi Bhabha explains, is an "insignia of colonial authority and signifier of colonial desire and discipline" (102). In the process of learning the King's English, these Chinese migrant children also implicitly accept the idea that they are inferior in front of the British power and learning the language will elevate them to the status of qualified citizens of the colonial nation. As Choy writes in the novel, Miss Doyle's duty is to "mold" these migrant children "into some ideal collective functioning together as a military unit with one purpose: to conquer the King's English, to belong at last to a country that she envisioned including all of us" (180). However, it is doubtful that these Chinese migrant children in Vancouver Chinatown will ever really become

equal members of the commonwealth. All the same, a smattering of British culture does have some influence on these Chinatown children.

When Jung-Sum inherits the turtle from Dai Kew, he changes the turtle's Chinese name "Lao Kwei" to "*George, ... King George*", because in his eyes, "this is a *Canada* turtle" (Choy 77). Kiam wants to name himself "Ken". His Chinese Canadian girlfriend, Jenny Chong, likes the idea and says that "we should all have real English names. When we're outside of Chinatown, we should try not to be so different" (Choy 124). Changing Chinese names to English ones implies that the loyalty to British rule has already taken roots in many young Chinese immigrants. In their minds, English names will help them integrate into the Canadian society and justify their Canadian identity. Yet, on the contrary, Canada's colonial relationship to Britain further marginalizes Chinese Canadian's position in Canada. In Deborah L. Madsen's words, they are "at the margins of the imperial margins,... as 'aliens' residing in an outpost of empire" ("Mo No" 109).

The fourth essential component in Wayson Choy's Vancouver Chinatown is Canada. The Canadian government was indifferent toward the residents' suffering in Vancouver Chinatown during the Great Depression. When food and job opportunities were becoming scarce, Vancouver Chinatown did not receive any help from the Canadian government. Even those who "had gone to universities in the 1920s and '30s but remained unemployed because only Canadian citizens could qualify as professionals. For if you were Chinese, even if you were born in Canada, you were an educated alien— never to be a citizen, never a Canadian with the right to vote" (Choy 139). Without jobs, Vancouver Chinatown suffered starvation. This was Canadian government's tactic to expel Chinese immigrants from Canada, because the violence, gambling, prostitution, and drug abuse in Vancouver Chinatown led the government to believe that this community "may represent an administrative 'problem' for the city" (Beneventi 143). This reflected Canadian government's orientalist superiority. But Vancouver Chinatown's solidarity

demonstrated Chinese immigrant's defiance and posed "a challenge to the self-acknowledging 'mainstream' of metropolitan culture, to the hegemonic tendencies of patriarchal and ethnocentric discourses" (Huggan 408).

Although Canadian government's nonchalance did not politically help the development of Vancouver Chinatown, the intercultural composition of Canada as a nation of immigration had penetrated into the heart of Chinatown. According to Miluše Chlumecká's explanation, Canada has a long-established reputation for being "a mosaic of world cultures" in which "everybody is expected to respect each other's cultures of origin" (7). In other words, different ethnic groups mingle together without losing their identities. However, this is not the Vancouver Chinatown Choy describes in *The Jade Peony*. In the previous quote, Choy has explained the difference between "multicultural" and "intercultural". Chlumecká's explanation corresponds to Choy's understanding of the "multicultural". Although different ethnic groups meet together as colorful pieces of a cultural mosaic, they still remain individual colors. What Choy pictures in this novel is an intercultural Chinatown of which the borders are blurred.

Vancouver Chinatown has a long history of intermingling with other ethnic groups. In a recent archaeological project in Vancouver Chinatown, archaeologists have found a whole boot at the excavation site. It was identified "as a woman's high-top ankle boot whose copper eyelets dated it as turn-of-the-century footwear" (Lim 25). Its size was too large for a Chinese woman at that time. Thus, archaeologists conclude that it "belonged to a European Canadian woman—a prostitute" (Lim 25). This evidence suggests that even at the beginning of the twentieth century, Chinese was not the only ethnic group living in Vancouver Chinatown. Choy's *The Jade Peony* depicts this mixture with other ethnic groups in Vancouver Chinatown. Inside these Chinese immigrants' old houses, "the wide cracks in the walls had been stuffed a generation before with newspapers printed in a strange Eastern European language" (Choy 73). The overlap between Eastern European culture and Chinese culture in the houses indicates that the construction of

Vancouver Chinatown is not purely Chinese. Another example is Jook-Liang's dreams in which she hears her "neighbours' whisperings rising towards the ceiling, Jewish voices, Polish and Italian voices, all jostling for survival, each as desperate as Chinese voices" (Choy 51). Other ethnic groups mix with Chinese immigrants, and essentially they face the same problems of survival in Canada. This is similar to the Chinatown in lower east Manhattan in New York where Little Italy is its neighbor.

In Choy's Vancouver Chinatown, Chinese immigrants' paths intersected with other ethnic groups in many aspects. Frank's fellow laborers are "natives, Hindus, and runaway city men of all sorts, depression-broke and desperate" (Choy 111). Jung-Sum's trainer at the Hastings Gym is an African Canadian. Nellie Yip, a white woman, is "one of the midwives most trusted to help with the delivery of Chinatown babies" (Choy 96). Of course, the most intercultural space in this novel is Miss Doyle's class:

At recess, our dialects and accents conflicted, our clothes, heights and handicaps betrayed us, our skin colors and backgrounds clashed, but inside Miss E. Doyle's tightly disciplined kingdom we were all—lions or lambs—equals.

We had glimpsed Paradise. (Choy 184)

This class is an ideal state of the intercultural Canada where all ethnic groups treat each other equally and respectfully. Although their migrant identity has robbed these students' sense of belonging, it crosses over the boundaries as a bridge between different communities and connected them. Therefore this Canadian component culturally melts down the solid boundaries surrounding Vancouver Chinatown.

The above four components, Chinese, American, British, and Canadian, have helped construct the Vancouver Chinatown in Wayson Choy's *The Jade Peony*. But at the same time, they work in distinct directions that result in the destabilization of Vancouver's Chinatown. In the novel, the youngest narrator Sekky represents the dynamics of these components. Being born and raised in a Chinese Canadian family, his growth necessitates negotiations with these

contradictory components. His reactions to the overwhelmingly intercultural Vancouver Chinatown step by step tears down the site's boundaries.

Linguistically, Sekky knows “enough Chinese and English to speak to people”, and “each language was mixed in with a half-dozen Chinatown dialects” (Choy 133). He possesses the ability to bridge both old and modern Chinese to the outside English speaking world. This suits his hybrid identity about which he is always confused. He asks Stepmother “Am I Chinese or Canadian?” (Choy 133). Grandmama says “Chinese”, while Father adds “We are also Canadian” (Choy 133). Later, he begins to understand his complex identity: “I was the Canadian-born child of unwanted immigrants who were not allowed to become citizens. The words RESIDENT ALIEN were stamped on my birth certificate, as if I were a loitering stranger” (Choy 135). Due to Sekky's hybrid identity, it is impossible for him truly to belong to any pure ethnic culture and community.

Yet, from another perspective, Sekky's hybrid identity enables him to trespass the borders between different cultures and communities. In Sekky's words, he is “born without understanding the boundaries” (Choy 135). Under Meiying's influence, Sekky crosses the border between Chinatown and Little Tokyo, regardless of the war between China and Japan. He breaks “the unspoken law: *Never betray your own kind*” (Choy 214). In the interview with Rocío G. Davis, Choy also notes that children in Vancouver Chinatown were educated to have “a sense that we did not — should not— cross those lines” (“Interweaving” 276). Those lines are the “invisible borders” Chinese immigrants draw to separate Chinatown from “other ghettoized people” nearby (Davis, “Interweaving” 276). These lines function as self-protection and ethnic royalty. Yet in the novel, Sekky's transgression of the “unspoken law” symbolically erases these borderlines. Although both Sekky and the Japanese Canadian Kazuo feel foreign on the other's territory, they form their little “alliance” of Asian immigrants. Even against the background of

war and hatred between China and Japan, Sekky's friendship with Kazuo and his later promise to keep it a secret further deconstruct Vancouver Chinatown's ethnic border.

Sekky's subversive potential deconstructs not only Vancouver Chinatown's borders but also its structure from within. In the novel, Sekky had a nickname "mo no", meaning "no brain" in Chinese, because he is always confused about the proper titles for family members and relatives. Due to the Chinese Exclusion Act at that time, many Chinese immigrants entered Canada with fake identity papers. They pretended to be the family members of those who were already in Canada. However, if Canadian immigration officers heard "mo no" children like Sekky call wrong titles of these paper immigrants in public, they would question the children and the paper immigrants. Then "certain 'family' members would disappear. Households would be broken up. Jobs would be lost. Jail and shame and suicides would follow" (Choy 135). In other words, Sekky's careless slip of tongue can jeopardize many Chinese immigrants' life in Vancouver Chinatown. What is more, culturally, titles in a Chinese family reflect each family member's status. They signify the structure and order of a family. Therefore misnaming raises "a challenge to the hierarchical nature of family" (Lee, "Engaging" 19). Family is the smallest unit of a community. Sekky's confusion about family titles has fundamentally threatened and even subverted the tradition and order of the Chinese community in Vancouver Chinatown. At the end of the novel, when Sekky calls Stepmother "Mother" (Choy 238), he eventually acknowledges his real identity within the mother-child relation. Changing the title from "Stepmother" to "Mother", he elevates this relationship and his own identity to a higher position than the order and discipline in the patriarchal Vancouver Chinatown.

In addition to the plot and characters in *The Jade Peony*, Choy's writing style also coincides with the destabilization of Vancouver Chinatown. First of all, Choy writes about Vancouver Chinatown from an insider's point of view. This writing refutes the distorted Western Orientalist depiction of the site. In Rocío G. Davis's words, this book "invites a rewriting of

Canadian history that validates the Chinese presence in Canada, layering the Chinese Canadians' process of self-definition, as they are permitted to position themselves within a larger cultural and social framework" ("Chinatown" 126). Thus Choy's retelling of Vancouver Chinatown deconstructs its position in the conventional Canadian history.

Secondly, this novel has three narrators. Each constructs a Vancouver Chinatown from a distinct perspective. Choy compares this narrative technique to the "idea of the hologram" which "you have the three main characters interacting and in the middle of their interaction you create a fourth character which is Chinatown itself. You have three views of it, interacting in the same time period but weaving in and out of the present, past, and future" (Davis, "Interweaving" 273). What Choy intends to achieve here is a rich and multi-dimensional depiction of Vancouver Chinatown. It is a counter to the one-dimensional Western picture of the site. Beyond this, three narrators' descriptions of Vancouver Chinatown do not agree with each other completely. The result of these disagreements in narration leads to multiple versions of the Chinatown. In this way, Choy has destabilized the homogeneity of Vancouver Chinatown.

Thirdly, when each narrator retells their stories, Choy adopts streams of consciousness to organize the structure. Thus, Choy glues three narrators' fragmented emotion and memory together to paint his picture of Vancouver Chinatown. This technique further deconstructs the composition of Vancouver Chinatown. It turns the Chinatown into a fragmental, reconstituted, and flowing site.

In reality, the history of Vancouver Chinatown coincides with Choy's perception of this easily breakable site. This place has transformed greatly in the past fifty years. Many old store signs were removed after a new sign bylaw passed in 1974. Chinese immigrants moved out of the old Chinatown zone around Pender Street and Main Street. Old and new Chinese immigrants have dispersed to other areas of the city. As Lim laments, "that bachelor society is gone, and whatever value its community recognized in sites (i.e., physical layout or particular buildings)



and objects disappeared with the inhabitants” (27). Now the Vancouver Chinatown has no clear borders on the city map. For the Vancouver residents, it is just “a place for shopping and dining” (Lim 23). Nonetheless, we cannot deny the old Chinatown’s existence and value in the history of Canada. In 2011, Vancouver Chinatown was designated as a National Historic Site of Canada. Because without the old Vancouver Chinatown, there would not be the present Chinese Canadians and Canada.

However, the collapse of old Vancouver Chinatown is not necessarily a bad thing, because it does not mean the disappearance of Chinese Canadian immigrants or their culture. In fact, the boundaries of the old Chinatown had restricted these Chinese immigrants’ mobility. Without those boundaries, Chinese immigrants obtain more opportunities to better their lives. Furthermore, Chinatown’s collapse in both Choy’s fiction and reality has helped Chinese Canadian immigrants “reject the emphasis on place as the primary signifier for identity prevalent in the minds of” many Westerners (Davis, “Chinatown” 133). One’s location can not fully represent an individual’s identity.

The above are the literary representations of Chinatown and its relations to Chinese immigrants. As a comparison, in the following part we will see some photographic representations. Since both Fae Myenne Ng and Wayson Choy narrates Chinatown from an insider’s point of view, in the next part we will shift to an outsider’s view of the locale. George Grantham Bain’s photographs of New York Chinatown from the 1900s to 1930s belong to this category.

George Grantham Bain was “born in Chicago in January 1865, and grew up in Saint Louis” (Carlebach ix). He began by working for newspapers at nineteen (Little 125). His friends called Bain the “Father of News Photography”, but he was not a professional photographer (Carlebach vii). What he did for most of his life was collecting and selling photographs to

newspapers. His largest contribution to American journalism is his George Bain News Service, which established a new system of gathering and distributing photographs for news reports.

The newspapers and magazines in the 1880s and the 1890s relied on “line drawings (the half-tone had yet to be developed as a means for mechanically printing photographs)” to provide illustrations for the written texts (Little 126). Although photography was not a new thing at that time, most newspapers still used these rough and old-fashioned drawings. First, the process of inserting and printing photographs was complicated. Then, there were not enough photographs available, because “few publications had photographers on staff” (Carlebach viii). Bain saw the value in photography and knew that both readers and editors liked these delicate pictures. He wished to solve the problem first by supplying ample photographs to newspapers.

In 1898, Bain established the George Bain News Service, located at “15 Park Row in the heart of New York” (Carlebach xvii). This location gave him the advantage to deliver photographs to the newspaper agencies in New York in the shortest time. This is “probably the first such agency in America” that collects and sells photographs to “nearly every magazine and newspaper of major status in the country” (Hales 403). At the beginning, Bain took photographs himself. “Armed with a simple Kodak camera, Bain made informal portraits and occasionally casual outdoor snapshots of his subjects and included prints with his written profiles” (Carlebach xv). But his efforts were not satisfying, because he was not a professional photographer and his small amount of production could not meet the large demands from so many newspapers. Thus, he cooperated with other commercial photographers, such as Frances Benjamin Johnston and Henry F. Raess, to produce more photographs. These photographers turned their images over to Bain’s news service which in turn distribute them to newspapers and magazines for publication. In no time, Bain again noticed problems in this seemingly efficient mode of business. For most of the hired photographers were commercial studio photographers, they were not sensitive to the

news value in a photograph; and they usually took too long to produce a photograph. To solve these problems, Bain decided to hire and train his own photographers to do the job.

He selected a few enthusiastic and receptive young men from his office and taught them what he had learned about photography in his chemistry class at St. Louis University (Little 130). After some practice, Bain gave his apprentices cameras and “sent them out with exact instructions” (Little 130). These young apprentices acted as Bain’s agents and took whatever news pictures that Bain wished to capture. They learned quickly “and soon came back with the sort of picture that was needed” (Little 130). However, Bain did not give these young photographers any credits for their works. There were not photographers’ names on the photographs or the newspapers. In fact this was rather common at that time: “the name of the person behind the camera was almost always considered less important than the name of the person supplying the words” (Carlebach xvi). All the credits of these photographs went to the agency, George Bain News Service. Therefore, what we see today on those photographs are usually only the date and the title. We do not know for sure the identity of those who took the photographs in Bain’s collection.

From 1898 to 1905, Bain had already accumulated “one million photographs, all cataloged and cross-indexed” (Little 129). His next step was to build a news photo service based on a syndicate system. He asked for subscriptions from newspapers and magazines in America. Soon he had “over fifty papers” that signed up the service (Little 129). In order to boost his business, Bain listened closely to the needs of the market. In Peter Bacon Hales’s eyes, “Bain was preeminently a businessman, sensitive to the needs of his mass media customers and ready in an instant to mold his treatment to fit the demand” (407). In order to let his customers receive photographs faster, Bain even invented an automatic photograph printing machine to improve the speed and efficiency (Carlebach xxiv).

Of course, as a well-trained newspaper businessman, Bain's photographs are not his self-expression but a mouthpiece for the news media. These photographs cover the following popular subjects: "personalities, performing artists, sports events, New York as a social phenomenon, lower-class urban life, and major national events like strikes, riots, or celebrated murders" (Hales 403). These subjects show that the readers at that time were very concerned with social events and entertainment. Immigration and immigrants' lives no doubt fit this category. The immigrant inspection station opened in 1892 on Ellis Island was of great interest to American public. A large number of the photographs in Bain's collection depict new immigrants lining up to pass various inspections on Ellis Island. However, in these photographs, we rarely see any Chinese or Asian faces. Another series of photographs are about immigrants' life on the lower east side of Manhattan, the site of New York's original Chinatown.

Bain's photographs of New York Chinatown reflect the American public's curiosity of this locale and its residents. These photographs appeared on newspapers as "a series of entertaining, humorous, or sentimental vignettes" (Hales 403). Readers wished to know what these foreign people and their relatively secluded living environment looked like. The immigrants' life struggles however were not of these readers' concern. In addition to this, due to Bain's pursuit for the efficiency of news photography, his photographers were not able to spend much time to learn or understand Chinese immigrants' culture, nor were they able to reveal the immigrants' real lives beneath the appearance of what took place on the streets. For these reasons, Bain's photographs of New York Chinatown often focus on the exterior sceneries that look foreign and mysterious, for instance the streets of old and run-down houses, Chinese New Year celebration and decorations, tong violence etc.

This photograph titled "Chinatown, N.Y." (Figure 17) is a very typical representation of Chinatown in Bain's collections. This is a horizontal depiction of a street in New York Chinatown. As printed on the top, Bain's photographer ventured into Chinatown on January 1,



Figure 17. George Bain News Service. "Chinatown, N.Y.". 1913. Library of Congress.

1913, Western New Year. Through the lens, the photographer looks up at the flying Chinese and American flags<sup>4</sup> hanging on the tinpot three-story houses on both sides of the street. These flags indicate the celebration of Western New Year in Chinatown. Thus, the purpose of this photograph is to show how or if Chinese immigrants celebrate this Western festival. Compared to the large size of the buildings and flags, the walkers on the streets are small and faceless; some are even blended in the shades and background. This contrast shows that the focus of this photograph is on the street rather than the people. What is more, most people in this picture wear Western-style clothes which were not common on Chinese immigrants at that time. Maybe they are curious to know the celebration of Western New Year in Chinatown. Therefore, this photograph reflects how outsiders and tourists look at New York Chinatown. While Chinese immigrants' real life on this day is hidden inside the dark three-story houses.

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<sup>4</sup> The five-color-stripes flag was the flag of Republic of China from 1912 to 1915.



Figure 18. George Bain News Service. "Police and Detectives Guarding Chinatown". 1909. Library of Congress.

If the above photograph is a panoramic view of New York Chinatown, the next photograph (Figure 18) is a close-up of its street from an interesting perspective. The title of this photograph is "Police and Detectives Guarding Chinatown". In the center of the image, a white-man detective sits on a stool reading newspaper. He is probably looking for any useful information in the newspaper that will help him solve a recent crime. A policeman stands next to the detective. He is reading the same page with a lowered head. Judging from his clothes, shoes, and hair style, the man sits on the doorstep behind the detective and the policeman appears to be a Chinese immigrant. The same hat on him and the detective suggests that he may be hired by the detective as an assistant or local guide in Chinatown. He is watching warily at the other end of the street. On the left side, a Chinese immigrant passes the camera and notices the photographer. The background of photograph looks like a Chinese antique shop with various vases and other exotic objects in the showcase windows. The photographer positioned a Chinese-looking passersby and the Chinese goods in the picture frame to show that this photograph was taken in Chinatown.

In *Bain's New York: The City in News Pictures 1900-1925*, Michael Carlebach gives us the historical background of this photograph. It was taken on July 6, 1909. Just a month before on June 9, nineteen years old Elsie Sigel was murdered and her body was found in a Chinese immigrant's apartment in New York Chinatown. Carlebach notes that

the unsolved murder ... and the threat of gang violence on the 4th, convinced Acting Mayor Patrick F. McGowan and Chief Inspector Max Schmitterberger to send units from the Second Inspection District and the Elizabeth Street Station into Chinatown. The presence of police guards would presumably keep the peace between rival tongs, and coincidentally prevent outsiders from marching into Chinatown intent on exacting revenge for the murder of Miss Siegel. (164)

This background shows that outsiders at that time often related Chinatown to murder or tong violence. However, without attempting to conduct a thorough investigation, the New York government only wished to limit the crime within the Chinatown so that it would not spread to the other parts of New York city. Therefore, the purpose of this photograph was to tell outsiders two things. First, Chinatown was dangerous, and because of the tong wars, outsiders should not go there. Second, there were white policemen and detectives there to help control the violence, so it was safe outside Chinatown. However, viewers do not see any traces of tong or other violence in this photograph; nor was the photographer able to capture a tong fight or even a tong member. This photographer simply offered outsiders a superficial image of the mysterious and unsafe Chinatown that they imagined in their minds.

This kind of photograph news had a negative impact on the tourist business in Chinatown. A tour guide named Otto told the *New York Sun* about his business decline after a month's negative news coverage: "Nobody wants to see Chinatown when they reads that it is built on vice and crime, [but] there ain't any more here than anywheres"<sup>5</sup> (Carlebach 164). However, this was not of American readers' or George Grantham Bain's concern. Readers were satisfied with

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<sup>5</sup> The grammatical mistakes in this quote "reads" and "anywheres" are the original words of the Chinese American tour guide Otto who spoke ungrammatical English.



Figure 19. George Bain News Service. “Decoration for New Years, Chinatown”. 1912. Library of Congress.

the result that the photographs and news reports met their expectation of Chinatown. To Bain, readers’ acceptance brought him huge profit.

Not just wandering in the streets, some of Bain’s photographers did go inside Chinese immigrants’ houses in New York Chinatown. For instance, this photograph titled “Decoration for New Years, Chinatown” is an interior depiction of Chinatown (Figure 19). The title tells us the time and message of this photograph. The date at the bottom “FEB 20 1912” indicates that all the decorations in the picture are for the Chinese New Year, not the Western one. In the foreground, there are three pots planted with burning incense. To the right, there is a bamboo cup filled with bamboo slips for drawing lots and telling future. The two Chinese characters on the cup “靈籤”



mean “Divine lots”. Behind the incense pots there is another square box for lighting candles. An envelop stands next to the shining flower vases. The two Chinese characters on it “大吉” means “big fortune”. In the background, a Chinese god statue is surrounded by artificial flowers and peacock feathers. This setting is an altar inside a joss house in Chinatown. A joss house is a type of temple where Chinese worship gods, ancestors, or historical figures. The dark statue in the background of this photograph is the god of this joss house.

The selection of Chinese New Year and an altar inside a Chinese joss house reflects the photographer’s perspective of introducing Chinatown to outsiders. To outsiders, Chinatown is a miniature of the China thousands miles away. Since Chinese New Year is the most important festival for Chinese people, choosing this time to photograph the community is able to maximize the “Chineseness” in Chinatown to the utmost extent. The heavy decorations in the picture provide ample evidence. In fact, Chinese New Year is an important festival for family members to gather at home. Bain’s photographer did not or could not really enter these immigrants’ family and show how they celebrated this festival at home. Apart from that, Chinese religion is often a mystery to outsiders. Photographing a joss house in Chinatown would surely draw American readers’ attention out of curiosity. Yet neither the photographer nor those readers could understand the meanings of those flowers, candles, bamboo lots, the paper envelop, or the god’s statue. What they wished to obtain from this photograph was only a proof that Chinese worship was mysterious or superstitious.

From studying the previous three photographs from Bain’s collection, we can conclude that Bain’s approach to represent New York Chinatown was to meet American mass media’s expectation and demands. Therefore, the Chinatown in those photographs appears exotic, isolated, dangerous, and mysterious. The “Chineseness” is always the focus and emphasis. No doubt, as an outsider and a businessman in American news industry, Bain’s perspective was never able realistically or thoroughly to depict New York Chinatown to the American public. In

contrast, Chinese American photographer Benjamin Chinn, from an insider's point of view, gives the American public a chance to enter and experience a San Francisco Chinatown in real life.

Benjamin Chinn was born in San Francisco Chinatown in 1921. He lived in the family home on Commercial Street from birth for most of his life. He learned basic photography from one of his elder brothers at ten and was immediately attracted by it. In 1946, Chinn enrolled the newly established photography department at the California School of Fine Arts. Ansel Adams, one of the most influential photographers in America, founded the department that year and "handpicked the students, including Chinn" (Reed 8). Later, Chinn also took classes from a number of distinguished photographers, such as "Minor White, Ruth Bernhard, Dorothea Lange, Lisette Model and Imogen Cunningham" (Chinn, Poon, and Reed 37). During his study there, Chinn formed very good relationships with his mentors and absorbed their ideas on photography. Chinn's niece, a celebrated painter, Lenore Chinn remarks that her uncle "is indeed part of a burgeoning movement of West Coast photographers who were avant-garde pioneers in the field of photography" (Martine). In 1953, Chinn's photographs were presented in the group exhibition *Perceptions* organized by Minor White. The exhibition included works from Ansel Adams, Imogen Cunningham, Dorothea Lange, Edward Weston, Minor White and their ten most talented students. In the review of *Perceptions*, Minor White summarizes the influences of these "lively and creative group of photographers" on their students: "From Edward Weston and Ansel Adams: 'the classic techniques of sharpness from nose to horizon, exquisite tonal faithfulness to the substance of objects'. From Dorothea Lange: 'the emphasis on human truths'. From the California School of Fine Arts: the importance of 'personal expression'" (18). In Chinn's photographs, especially those about San Francisco Chinatown, we can easily find these qualities from his prominent teachers. From 1949 to 1950, Chinn went to Paris to study "sculpture at the Académie Julian and photographed the streets and flea markets of the city" (Reed 10). When he

was unable to find a well-paid job in Europe, Chinn returned to San Francisco and took a job as “the civilian director of a photography lab and training program for the Department of Defense until his retirement in the 1984” (Reed 18).

Most of Chinn’s Chinatown photographs were taken during his second year at the California School of Fine Arts. These photographs present street scenes, everyday life, and intimate portraits in San Francisco Chinatown in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The San Francisco Chinatown in the post-war era was a “battlefield of opposing cultural forces” (Reed 15). To the increasing number of tourists from outside, this was a “Chinese Theme Park” where they looked for Chinese features. Inside Chinatown, the fight between preserving Chinese cultural heritage, assimilating to American life style, and catering to American tourism was also escalating. So this was a conflicted and complex world: Chinese immigrants and American tourists, immigrants in Chinese dress and Western style, Chinese herb shops and ice cream bars with English signs coexisted. Western photographers did not pay attention nor emphasize these multifaceted details. But to Chinn, these were the reality of his home; and instinctively he recorded them in his photographs.

As we discussed previously about George Grantham Bain’s photographs of the New York Chinatown, Western photographers tended to focus on the surface, in other words, the grand panoramic view and the “Chineseness” in the streets. They did not delve into Chinese immigrants’ real lives at the site. Yet as a local resident who had lived there for his whole life, Chinn’s perspective differs from a tourist’s. In his photographs, we see people working or conducting their daily activities in Chinatown. The scenes are usually small and quiet, such as doorsteps, street corners, or a stairway inside a house. His photographs, in Alexandra Chang’s words, possess “an Atget-like quality of a moment from everyday life frozen in time” (17). The French photographer Eugene Atget was famous for his lovingly depiction of a calm and fascinating Paris at the turn of the twentieth century. In the similar fashion, Chinn’s photographs



Figure 20. Benjamin Chinn. “Drying Fish, Sidewalk of Wentworth Alley”. 1947. Gelatin silver print. *Benjamin Chinn at Home in San Francisco: January 7 - May 31, 2003*, Chinese Historical Society of America Museum and Learning Centre. San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America Museum and Learning Centre, 2003. Page 24. Print.

of San Francisco Chinatown are also full of his individual observation and sensibility. In addition, in Chinn’s photographs, there is no evasion of American elements or special emphasis on the “Chineseness”. Chinese and American cultures, traditional and modern Chinese elements all exist in Chinn’s Chinatown.

Let us start from a typical photograph of San Francisco Chinatown street scene taken by Chinn (Figure 20). The title, “Drying Fish, Sidewalk of Wentworth Alley”, tells viewers the subject and setting of this photograph. A number of wooden cases containing silver fish line up neatly along the sidewalk. The square shape of the fish cases shrinks gradually from right to left following the street curb line. It forms a clean and orderly beauty. Behind this line, leaning

against the wall, there are two more fish cases and wood planks to be used to make additional boxes. The two fish cases establish the connection between the fish cases in the foreground and the doors, windows, and wall in the background. The square shape of the door frames and window frames coincides with the square fish cases in the foreground. The lines and shapes in this photograph create a strong abstract and simple charm. The bright silver color of the fish also corresponds to the sunshine on the window and door. The whole picture is harmonious in both form and tone. These formal elements of shape, line, and tone reflect Chinn's education at California School of Fine Arts. One of the greatest influence came from Chinn's teacher, a symbolist painter, Dorr Bothwell. According to Chinn, Mrs. Bothwell "taught him how to organize his vision, to see shapes and tones, and to understand how they recede and advance in space" (Reed 16). Clearly, in this photograph, we see Bothwell's Western aesthetic ideas in the way how Chinn positions the fish cases in front of the doors and windows.

Apart from the Western techniques in this photograph, the subject contains references to Chinese immigrants' lives. Depending upon the large amount of fish, the owner must be a fish seller who lives behind the open door. For a fish seller, drying fish in these wood cases is a part of his daily life. Since there is not any signs outside the fish store, the customers who frequent here must have lived in this neighborhood in Chinatown for a long time and know these alleys very well. This alley is different from the busy streets we usually see in Western photographers' Chinatown photos. Here we do not see any tourists, large signs of Chinese restaurants, or souvenir shops. What Chinn presents is a peek at a Chinese migrant fish seller's quiet life in Chinatown.

Chinn's photographs of course do not neglect the busy pace of Chinatown. Again, his focus is on its residents' everyday activities rather than festivals or celebrations which we usually see in Western photographers' work. For instance, Figure 21 shows a Chinese immigrant unloading a large piece of pork from a truck. He is probably carrying it to the butcher shop behind the



Figure 21. Benjamin Chinn. "Unloading Sides of Pork, Grant Ave.". 1948. Gelatin silver print. *Benjamin Chinn at Home in San Francisco: January 7 - May 31, 2003, Chinese Historical Society of America Museum and Learning Centre*. San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America Museum and Learning Centre, 2003. Page 32. Print.

camera. For the Chinese immigrant in the picture, this movement of carrying pork is a part of his daily life. Yet in Chinn's eyes, this simple movement composes the real image of San Francisco Chinatown. The local residents all have various kinds of burdens on their shoulders. They contribute their labor to exchange for a better life in Chinatown.

Another interesting trait of this photograph is the coexistence of Chinese and American culture in San Francisco Chinatown. The shop signs in Chinese characters in the background and the frame symbol on the truck show that Chinese immigrants have preserved their language and culture in Chinatown. While the Yellow Cab, the Caucasian man behind the Chinese immigrant, and the shiny limousine with a California plate remind viewers that this is also America. There is

not any disharmony between these two elements in this photograph. According to Dennis Reed, this “ironic” commingling of culture “was unintentional on Chinn’s part. He was simply photographing a commonplace occurrence that was a part of his everyday life. The irony is present in the photograph because of the inherent duality of Chinatown” (15). Reed calls this coexistence of Chinese and American culture “ironic”, because Chinn’s representation of Chinatown is so different from what outsiders expect to see. However, the coexistence of cultures and the in-between state are inherent in Chinatown. It is the outsiders who refuse to accept the fact that Chinatown has already lifted its blockade of the borders.



Figure 22. Benjamin Chinn. “Young Girl in Window”. 1948. Gelatin silver print. *Benjamin Chinn at Home in San Francisco: January 7 - May 31, 2003*, Chinese Historical Society of America Museum and Learning Centre. San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America Museum and Learning Centre, 2003. Page 34. Print.

Beyond street scenes, Chinn took intimate portrait photographs of San Francisco Chinatown residents as well. Since Chinn knew most of them as neighbors and friends, people in his photographs often do not pose or shy away from the camera. Their faces, gestures and emotion all appear so natural on photo prints. For example, Figure 22 “Young Girl in Window” shows a little Chinese migrant girl leaning against the window sill. She looks out of the window with a half-opened mouth in her calm face. Some pieces of paper lie beneath her hands. She is folding something. A large glass jar stands next to her. It is half filled with Chinese traditional medicine soaked in liquor. The sunshine lights up parts of the wood shelf behind her. Some white packages stack neatly on the shelf. They seem to be products for sale. The girl’s straight look outside is meaningful in many ways. Maybe she is looking for any customers who might come inside or waiting for her parents who are absent at that moment. It is also possible that she has noticed Chinn with a camera pointing at her, but she is not surprised. As a frequent wanderer in Chinatown alleys, Chinn must be a familiar face to her. In her tranquil eyes, we are able feel a trust and emotional communication with the photographer.

In fact, every one of Chinn’s photograph is full of emotion and love toward San Francisco Chinatown. He expresses feelings in such a subtle way that all his photographs appear natural without any pretense or exaggeration. This is reflected even outside of his artistic creation. After his retirement in 1984, Chinn “volunteered at a neighborhood photo store in Chinatown, operating a machine that developed photos in an hour” (Thurber). What is more, he sold his car and donated the seven thousand dollars to charities in San Francisco Chinatown, such as “the Chinese Historical Society of America, On Lok (a senior health organization), museums, [and] libraries” (Martine). As a resident living there most of his life, Chinn recompensed his home in these subtle and touching ways.

Once Chinn was asked what he loved most about the San Francisco Chinatown, and he replied that “It’s a place where if you want privacy, you could have privacy. You can sit in a place



and not say anything, they don't know who you are, don't care -- they leave you alone. But if you want to talk, meet people on the street, you can always do that too" (Martine). Chinatown in Chinn's heart is very personal and intimate. It is a place where he feels at home. When he took those photographs, he was not bounded by any photographic philosophies or rules. He relied on the instinctive emotion toward his hometown. Thus he did not need to look for any particular angles to present the "Chineseness", commercialism, or tourist attractions in Chinatown. Chinn's intuition is his "inner eye" that guides him to capture the essence of San Francisco Chinatown (Warren 23).

To Chinn, the essence of San Francisco Chinatown is a place where all its residents feel at home. He even insists that all his life he has "never suffered any sort of discrimination" or felt as a stranger on his own land (Martine). The people in his photographs also tell the viewers that Chinatown is their home and they belong there. What is more, Chinn does not crop the American elements from his photographs of Chinatown, because they are as fundamental as the Chinese elements in the composition of Chinatown. In Gordon H. Chang's eyes, Chinn's photographs help Chinese Americans "claim Americanness", assert that they are "as much American as others in the country", and "end the stigma of perpetual foreignness placed upon" them (xi). Thus, in Chinn's photographs, Chinese immigrants, Chinese culture, and American surroundings coexist harmoniously. Chinese immigrants are shown as a part of America.

However, Gordon H. Chang also points out that "aesthetic judgement in America was never race-free but was always racially constrained. Viewers could rarely free themselves from the assumption that art produced by persons who looked 'Asian' somehow had to express something 'Asian'" (x). Clearly, Benjamin Chinn's photographs did not satisfy these viewers' racialized expectation at that time, because Chinn never emphasized the outlandish and mysterious Chineseness of the Chinatown and its residents. Viewers only saw ordinary people

and life like themselves. Maybe this is why Chinn was not as famous and successful as George Grantham Bain's News Service.

Chinn's photographic career also mirrors the racialized judgement and expectation of Chinatown. After his study in California Institute of Fine Art and in Paris, he stopped taking art photographs of Chinatown. Chinn explains that "I was thinking, who will look at them?" (Reed 18). Maybe Chinn understood the American aesthetic judgement of a Chinese migrant photographer and his photographs of Chinatown. The fact is that his photographs were rarely published until the beginning of the twenty-first century. Before that, his photographs only appeared in two group exhibitions: one is the *Perceptions* in 1953, and the other one is "an exhibition celebrating the 50th anniversary of Ansel Adams first class in photography" in 1998 (Reed 37). Even until recently, his only work in print as an individual photographer was a photograph of a flea market in Paris on the cover of *Aperture* magazine in 1952. Perhaps, to American viewers, a homelike Chinatown without festival celebration or antique souvenir shops does not seem as interesting as a flea market in Paris. Chinn chose to keep his photographs in private files which "nobody would see" (Martine). Even his closest family members have only seen "the tip of the iceberg. So much of his life remains a mystery" (Martine).

However, with the growth of Chinese immigrants' self-awareness, Chinese migrant communities and institutes have discovered the historical and cultural value in Chinn's vintage photographs of San Francisco Chinatown. These photographs become a good way for both Chinese immigrants today and American public to retrieve a Chinatown that many have forgotten. In 2003, Chinese Historical Society of America Museum in San Francisco organized Chinn's solo exhibition "Benjamin Chinn at Home in San Francisco" in Chinatown. Later, the photographs from this exhibition were collected and published in an album *Benjamin Chinn at Home in San Francisco: January 7 - May 31, 2003*. Sadly, Chinn passed away in 2009. But historians, artists, and scholars are continuing their efforts to archive Chinn's entire photographic

work and digitize it. His photographs and their contribution to understanding Chinatown are emerging.

Now let us focus on Chinatown in detail. In the previous discussion, we already noticed the construction of Chinatown is becoming less and less solid and homogenous. As components of Chinatown, many Chinese migrant families also face the problem of disintegration. In the next part, we will look into the complex relationship and disintegration in Chinese migrant families through reading Frank Chin's play *The Year of the Dragon*. Similar to Chin's other works, such as *The Chickencook Chinaman* and *Donald Duk*, *The Year of the Dragon* reveals Chin's understanding of Chinese American identity. However, what is special about this play is its representation of the conflicts in Chinese migrant families, for instance, the conflicts between different generations, between Chinese patriarchal tradition and Western democratic idea, between the responsibility of inheritance and each individual's desire to develop themselves, and between interracial marriage and the preservation of ethnic purity.

The play is set in the Eng's apartment in San Francisco Chinatown on the Chinese New Year. The main character Fred Eng is a forty-year-old tour guide in Chinatown. Although he hates this job, it provides him with income to cover the cost of his father's medical care and his sister's college education. He always dreams of becoming a professional writer, but his responsibility to the family forces him to give up this dream. His biggest hope is to send his younger brother Johnny out of Chinatown to study. Fred's father Pa is an inconsiderate and autocratic patriarch in the family. Without telling other family members beforehand, he brings his Chinese wife, China Mama, to San Francisco and announces that she will live in this family. This reunion intensifies his Chinese American wife Ma's anxiety and frenzy. In addition to China Mama, Fred's sister Mattie brings another intruder home, her new American husband Ross. Ross tries to integrate into the family by showing his interests in Chinese culture. Yet the rest of the family still see him as an outsider. The confrontations between every member push this family to

the verge of collapse. In the climatic scene, Fred rebels against Pa's authority and enrages the latter to death. In the end, Fred inherits Pa's position in the family and continues his job as a tourist guide .

Throughout the play, we feel Frank Chin's despairing view of Chinese migrant families. In the Engs, each individual has their distinct life pursuits, which lead the family to divergent directions. However, this is only the appearance of Chinese migrant families' disintegration. The two fundamental causes are Chinese patriarchal family tradition and the West's stereotypes and discrimination toward Chinese immigrants.

In *The Year of the Dragon*, each family member has his or her particular status and responsibility in this patriarchal family. According to old Chinese tradition, Pa possesses the highest authority over all family members. He decides all others' life and career. It is the custom for his children to give money to Pa on the Chinese New Year (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 81). The oldest son Fred ranks second. He is responsible for looking after his younger siblings. Ma and China Mama are listed lower than their children because they are female. They seldom have a voice at home. Since China Mama is Pa's first wife, she is entitled to more respect than Ma, even though she has just entered the family. This strict order restrains family members from pursuing their own lives.

The second cause of the disintegration in Chinese migrant families is the West's discrimination and stereotypes toward Chinese immigrants. Historically speaking, the West's hostility compelled Chinese migrant families to settle down in relatively segregated Chinatowns. A series of immigration acts prevented them from reuniting with their family members in China. Furthermore, the racial discrimination created more difficulties for Chinese immigrants to find jobs outside Chinatown. In order to survive, some Chinese immigrants had to cater to the West's stereotypes and even turn the stereotypes into a business to make money. In *The Year of the Dragon*, Chinatown tourism and the Charlie Chan jokes are good examples. Dorothy Ritsuko

McDonald explains that Charlie Chan is “a character invented by a white man in 1925 and invariably played by white men in the movies and on television. Though intelligent, Chan has the expected Asian American qualities: he is humble, passive, polite, self-effacing, and effeminate, and has difficulties with English” (xxii). This character later became a popular stereotypical image of Chinese immigrants. Chinatown tourism and stereotypes slowly eroded Chinese immigrants’ image and identity. The characters in the play are involved in a battle between living behind a fake stereotypical mask for economic benefit and being true to themselves. This battle becomes a powerful force that destroys the consolidation of Chinese migrant families.

In *The Year of the Dragon*, the two intruders in the Eng’s family, China Mama and Ross, are the spokesmen for the above two causes of the family disintegration. Starting from China Mama, her delayed reunion with Pa is the result of the discriminative laws toward Chinese immigrants in America. As mentioned before, from the earlier 1875 Page Act to the later stricter 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, ordinary Chinese male were forbidden to bring their wives to America. These legal exclusion acts were “repealed in 1943 during the Second World War when China was an ally of the United States” (McDonald xii). Since this play took place in the Chinese New Year of the Dragon, Frank Chin was envisioning this family reunion in 1976, the year of the America bicentennial (McDonald xx), also a year of the Dragon. So there were not any exclusion acts against Chinese immigrants when China Mama arrived. Nonetheless, if the exclusion acts did not exist in the first place, Pa would not have left China Mama behind.

The most direct reason why China Mama comes at this time is because Pa is dying. He wishes to die with all family members by his side in the traditional Chinese way (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 99). Therefore, China Mama represents the family’s ties to the old Chinese tradition. Owing to the fact that Pa has married again with Ma in America, China Mama becomes “a reproachful reminder of the demeaning sexist Chinese system of polygamy and concubinage that was common practice in imperial China and through the earlier twentieth century” (Chua

178). In this sense, China Mama is the embodiment of patriarchal system. Her presence enhances Pa's patriarchal status in the family. This process goes with the change of China Mama's status in the family.

At the beginning of the play, we observe China Mama sitting alone with her luggage. Nobody bother to speak to her. She is clearly out of place in the family. Yet when Pa comes home, her role changes immediately. As the patriarch of the family, Pa exerts his power to elevate China Mama's status from anonymous and insignificant to a legitimate family member. When Fred kisses Ma on the cheek, Pa orders Fred to kiss China Mama, too (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 92). Beyond that, for China Mama is Pa's first wife, she has the right to sit on Pa's left when taking the family portrait. In contrast, Ma's role now is equivalent to a second wife or a concubine. Pa waves her "out of the picture brusquely" (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 126). Thus, China Mama's arrival further lowers Ma's status in the family.

Even before China Mama comes, Ma has little voice in this patriarchal family. Her place at home belongs to bathroom and kitchen, despite the fact that she had risked her American citizenship when she married Pa. Due to the various Chinese exclusion acts at that time, an intermarriage between a Chinese immigrant and an American was illegal. The American would lose his or her American citizenship. Regardless of Ma's sacrifice to the family, she does not have a respectable position within it. Therefore she often rushes into the bathroom and sings to let out her stress and unfulfilled desire. Later when China Mama comes and takes away her place of the family hostess, Ma becomes more irrational and hysteric. When China Mama walks into the kitchen to cook for the family, Ma "forcefully moves CHINA MAMA away from the kitchen area" in a very dramatic gesture and shoos her (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 89). Ma perceives China Mama as a threat and will not allow the latter to take over her only place at home. So Ma has to defend her status and compete for Pa's attention with China Mama.

At first, Ma threatens to tie China Mama up if Pa refuses to send the latter back (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 100). Seeing she is powerless in front of Pa's authority, Ma chooses to give up her pride and Chinese American identity and puts on a "Chinese" mask to please Pa. Before the family portrait, Ma "has done her hair too young for her" and "dressed in a tight cheongsam" to play "the part of a Chinese woman as authentically as she can, which means she's Susie Wong and Flower Drum Song" (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 126). Compared with China Mama's old age, Ma's youth is her advantage. In Ma's opinion, the traditional Chinese outfit cheongsam will make her appear more "Chinese" than China Mama in Pa's eyes. However, being a Chinese immigrant born in America, she has accepted unconsciously the West's stereotypical depiction of Chinese, i.e. Susie Wong and Flower Drum Song. Therefore, Ma's imitation of stereotypes only ridicules herself. Later Ma rushes for China Mama's seat next to Pa but is again brushed off (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 128). Ma argues that "All human beings are people" but does not receive Pa's support (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 128). Eventually, she realizes that she is not able to shatter the patriarchal order in this family. The only option left for Ma is to hold on to the unity of her family.

Now we switch to the second intruder in the Eng's family, Ross. In the introduction to the play's characters, Frank Chin describes Ross as "Mattie's China-crazy white husband. Aesthetic, supercilious, Mr. Nice Guy" (*The Chickencoop* 69). In *The Year of the Dragon*, Ross's fetish for Chineseness symbolizes the West's arrogance and fantasy about the exotic Chinese culture. Through marrying Sis, Ross becomes "a cultural voyeur" and "a tourist seeking a privileged entrée to an exotic spot" — a Chinese migrant family in real life (Chua 179). In order to satisfy his curiosity about Chineseness, Ross tries to blend himself in with the Engs' family.

Ross's strategy is to show off his knowledge of Chinese culture. He constantly quotes Chinese proverbs and Charlie Chan's words to prove that he is "more Chinese than" his Chinese American wife (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 78). However, his strategy is doomed to be a failure for

his stereotypes of Chinese immigrants. First, Chinese immigrants in America are not equivalent to Chinese in China. Therefore Chinese proverbs can be unfamiliar to many American-born Chinese immigrants. Furthermore, Charlie Chan is a Western fantasy of Chinese immigrants. It is not wise to compare your listeners to a distorted image of them. Thus, no matter how hard Ross tries to integrate into this Chinese migrant family, he is still an outsider and intruder. Frank Chin considers Ross's role as "the audience surrogate to let people know that everything you see here is intentional" (Davis, "Frank" 88). In other words, Chin uses Ross to tell the American public that their imaginative perception of Chinese immigrants is not real.

Apart from stereotypes, the family's fear of exogamy is another reason why Ross is an outsider. Ma feels this home "looks different" because of Ross's presence (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 93). Even though Ma was brought up as "The Best of the East and the Best of the West" in the American culture of a "melting pot" (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 127), she still needs some time to accept the interracial marriage. Werner Sollors points out that ethnic groups sometimes consider interracial marriage as a threat to the "ethnic purity" and "human identity" (224). An "ethnic purist" even dreams of "the eternal likeness of all after-generations to his or her own image" (Sollors 224). In *The Year of the Dragon*, Ma may be not an "ethnic purist", but Pa is very disappointed at Sis marrying Ross. He sighs that "Bok gwai low! And no more blood. No more Chinese babies born in a family" (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 109). Pa's reaction reflects some Chinese immigrants' desire to preserve the purity of their community and family.

As a result, Ross has neither a place nor his voice in the family. Every family member can interrupt or ignore his speech and actions. However, this does not mean Ross's presence is insignificant to this Chinese migrant family. Through his wife Sis, Ross still widens the gaps in the family.



In *The Year of the Dragon*, Sis is an escaper and betrayer of the family. She confesses to Ross that “This wasn’t my home then. It’s not my home now. My home is with you in Boston, Ross. Nowhere else” (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 76). Perhaps because she has lived with Ross for a long time and is accustomed to the American life outside Chinatown, or because she does not want to experience the hard life again in Chinatown, Sis is determined to draw a line between her and other family members in Chinatown. What is more, she constantly persuades other family members to leave Chinatown as well. She argues that “Out there we’ll be able to forget we’re Chinamen, just forget all this and just be people” (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 110). This argument reveals that Sis is “lack of ethnic pride and self-esteem” (Austin 2). In her opinion, if they leave Chinatown and abandon their ethnic identity, they will be completely assimilated into the American society. Then, all problems in the family will disappear. However, her marriage with Ross is already a problem for the family.

In Fred’s eyes, Sis and Ross are not different from the “tourists” on Grant Avenue (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 112). They visit this family only to experience the Chinese New Year. Robert Ji-Song Ku sharply points out that Sis “is the one who defends and apologizes for the touristic desires of Ross, the stand-in for the institutionalized fetishism of American theatre” (89). Thus, Sis’s role in this play is truly a tourist guide for Ross and the West. She leads Ross and Western audience to watch how Chinese immigrants celebrate Chinese New Year at home.

Chinese New Year is a festival for all family members to be together at home. But Sis comes home only to “wind up a tour promoting” her Chinese “cookbook” (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 74). Her goal is to introduce Chinese food to American readers and establish a Chinese food franchise. Fred, who really plays the role of tourist guide, calls Sis’s cookbooks “a new literary form. Food pornography” (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 86). He sees the commonality between selling Chinese food culture and his job of selling the exoticized and eroticized Chinatown to American public. Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong explains the concept of “food

pornography” as “making a living by exploiting the ‘exotic’ aspects of one’s ethnic foodways. In cultural terms it translates to reifying perceived cultural differences and exaggerating one’s otherness in order to gain a foothold in a white-dominated social system” (55). Sis’s Chinese cookbook caters to the West’s curiosity and stereotypes of Chinese immigrants. In exchange, Sis earns economic profit. In Wong’s words, Sis wrenches Chinese immigrants’ “cultural practices out of their context and display[s] them for gain to the curious gaze of ‘outsiders’” (56). In this way, Sis capitalizes on Chinese immigrants’ “foreignness”.

Calling Sis’s cookbook “food pornography” also reveals Fred’s frustration that “no one’s gonna read the great Chinese American novel” (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 83). As an experienced Chinatown tourist, Fred understands American public’s expectation very well. They are only interested in an exotic version of Chinese American culture, while the real Chinese American life in Fred’s novels is not marketable. For the sake of the brother-sister relationship, Sis asks Fred to join her cookbook project and names it “Mama Fu Fu”. Ironically, “Mama Fu Fu” in Cantonese means “perfunctory”, “sloppy”, or “mediocre” (Wong 60). According to Wong, this name implies that Fred’s joint cooperation with Sis is “doomed because it is by nature makeshift and phony” (60). It also mirrors Frank Chin’s belief that a phony representation of Chinese immigrants and their culture is doomed to failure.

Therefore, in this play, the Chinese cookbook is a conflict starter rather than a bond between Fred and Sis. From Sis’s perspective, inviting Fred to join her cookbook project is her recompense for his previous sacrifice. In the past, Fred gave up his college education to send Sis to school. So Sis thinks that the profit from selling Chinese cookbook will pay him back. She tells Fred that “All I owe you is money; I’ll be glad to pay you back every cent, with interest. Just say the word and I’ll write you a check” (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 118). This statement shows Sis’s Western capitalist ideas, i.e. you can solve every problem with money. But Sis’s transformation into a materialist disappoints Fred greatly. To Fred, it is his responsibility to take

care of his younger sister. Fred only hopes that Sis will take the whole family out of Chinatown to live a better life. So this is a conflict between a materialist and a family man.

Being family-oriented, Fred sacrifices his dreams and youth to take care of his family. After helping Sis finish her education, Fred wishes to send his younger brother Johnny to study out of Chinatown as well. He tells Johnny to go with Sis to Boston and explains that “I don’t raise ya to be a crook or a tourist guide” (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 96). Fred is worried that the gang culture in Chinatown will put Johnny’s life in danger. As a tourist guide himself, he knows that this job means a betrayal to himself and his own culture. Franck Chin defines a Chinatown tourist as “a Chinaman, playing a white man playing Chinese ... A minstrel show. The tourist guides of Chinatown are traditionally the despised and perverted” (McDonald xxii). Fred fakes his English with Chinese accent and exaggerates the food in Chinatown restaurants, even though he understands that these behavior debase not only himself but also Chinese migrant culture. As analyzed previously, the major cause for Fred’s hopeless state in Chinatown is the West’s discriminative and stereotypical perception of Chinese migrant community. This perception mixes up Chinese immigrants, Chinatown, and Chinese all together. Yet, for Fred, the easiest way to solve this chaos is to leave Chinatown and merge into American society. So he suggests that Johnny go to Boston.

However, Fred’s suggestion conflicts with Johnny’s determination to stay. Johnny does not want to break away from his family. He tells Fred that “I don’t know nothing bout being ‘at home’ man. All I know at home is you” (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 123). He continues, “I believe in the Chinese family... I wanta be a part of this family when pa kicks, not a bum!” (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 124-25). The unity of all family members matters most to Johnny. Leaving Chinatown means leaving his family behind. Another reason is because he is afraid of losing his ethnic identity. Sis’s speech about “forgetting Chinatown to become ‘just people’ scared Johnny” (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 116). For this point, Fred understands Johnny’s fear and agrees that

“Here we’re somebody” (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 117). Chinatown preserves Chinese immigrants’ cultural roots and cultivates their ethnic identity. Thus to Johnny, leaving Chinatown signifies giving up a part of his identity.

Therefore, on Johnny, we observe third-generation immigrants’ inclination for preserving their ethnic community and identity. When we consider the historical background of Johnny’s growth, it is evident that the 1970s is the era of the civil rights movement. It is “a time of heightened awareness of ethnic identity and an increased sense of ethnic pride. ... Many wanted to preserve and assert their ethnic differences and configure America as a plural rather than a homogenized society” (Chua 179). Young people of Johnny’s age are the major force of this movement. Although Frank Chin does not describe specifically the civil rights movement in this play, Johnny’s words still imply his desire to be a part of it and join the fight for equal rights. When Fred tells Johnny to stay out of trouble, because there are “a million cops out there” (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 123). Johnny argues, “Hey, man, everyone’s got guns” (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 123). Here, the “guns” mean not only the weapon, but also hints at the fight for ethnic equality. Therefore, Johnny’s determination to stay in Chinatown can be under the influence of civil rights movement.

When facing the option between “being ‘somebody’ in a closed, suffocating ethnic community and being ‘nobody’ in the larger, more hostile white world” (Wong 61), Johnny chooses the former, because he believes in the value of cultural heritage. Vladimir C. Nahirny and Joshua A. Fishman notice this quality of many third-generation immigrants. They write that “while estranged from their parental heritage, the sons, nevertheless, remained more conscious of their ethnic identity than were their immigrant fathers” (322). They desire to retrieve what is lost in the process of ethnic assimilation. In *The Year of the Dragon*, Johnny steals a dancing lion “of a tong from its sacred place inside an expensive Chinatown restaurant” (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 96). This lion symbolizes not only the Chinese New Year celebration but also the cultural

heritage of Chinese immigrants. Taking this lion home reflects Johnny's desire to salvage the disappearing cultural roots in his family.

Interestingly, that lion belongs to Pa's tong (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 97). This coincidence implies that Pa shares the same belief in cultural roots with Johnny. However the two characters' reasons for this common belief are different. For Johnny, the lion is a sign of his cultural identity. While for Pa, it symbolizes patriarchal power in Chinese tradition. Pa considers the action of moving the lion to home as a sign of strengthening his patriarchal position in the family. But Pa's patriarchal domination confronts with Fred's concern for all family members' individual rights and development.

Pa believes that he is the ruler of the family and everyone should listen to him. Yet Fred thinks that each family member deserves respect and an equal chance to pursue a better life. Pa repeatedly emphasizes that this is his house in order to reinforce his authority in the family. To confront Pa, Fred attempts to provoke democracy. He asks the rest of the family: "Everybody one vote. All in favor of leaving right after New Year's raise your hand. Majority rules, meeting's adjourned, start packing..." (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 111). However, Fred does not receive any support from his family, because they see no hope of changing the patriarchal structure in this family. In fact, the end of this play proves their foresight. After Pa's death, Fred, as the first son, succeeds Pa's position in the family. He announced: "This is my house now. Pa gave it to me. My ma. My China Mama. My Chinatown. My house! You all know that. If you're staying here man, you're mine" (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 141). No matter how he wishes to overturn the patriarchal structure, Fred does not escape the fate of becoming another Father figure.

To resolve this dilemma, we may start from Fred's conflict with Pa in his attempt to establish his own identity and self-worth. Fred believes that writing great Chinese American fiction is a way for him to realize self-worth and display his Chinese migrant identity. However, for Pa, only obedience and economic success can prove Fred's worth and ability, just like his

friends' children who become doctors and engineers. Furthermore, Pa does not acknowledge the fact that Fred dropped out of college to take care of the family when Pa was sick. Seeing no future economic success for Fred, Pa only wishes his son to be as obedient as Charlie Chan's. In Frank Chin's opinion, "Chan's sons were lovable respectable fools, funny because they didn't have sense enough to know they weren't white and wouldn't stop trying. Lovable and respectable because they implicitly knew their place" (Chin, "Confessions" 67). In other words, Chan's sons are not aware of their identity. In the movies and fictions, they appear only when their father gives them instructions. Therefore, their worth derives only from their father. Yet Fred rejects to be his father's appendage. He demands his individual rights to realize his dream. His writing will prove his "aesthetic value" rather than Pa's idea of "utilitarian value" (Chua 181).

Nonetheless, Pa has his reasons as well. Since he must have experienced the West's racial discrimination in the past, Pa knows the importance of being economically independent in the first place. In Wong's words, Pa is an "unquestioning believer in Necessity"; therefore he can not see any "redeeming value" in Fred's "creative efforts" at writing Chinese American novels (59). Beyond that, having lived with the West's stereotypes for so long, Pa has already accepted those stereotypes unconsciously. A good example of his acceptance of stereotypes occurs when he needs Ross's suggestion to add a Charlie Chan joke to his inauguration speech for the mayor of Chinatown. Pa does not see the distortion of Chinese immigrants in Charlie Chan and his son. Also, as a strong believer of Chinese ancestry and patriarchal tradition, Pa regards Chinatown as his only home in American. Fred's plan of moving the family out of Chinatown will destroy Pa's home. This is the last thing Pa wants to see. Pa is so furious at Fred's disobedience that he uses up all his energy to beat Fred and eventually dies.

All the above conflicts lead this Chinese migrant family to breakdown. Frank Chin intentionally dramatizes the chaotic atmosphere to represent these conflicts in this play. We see

characters constantly speaking at the same time and interrupting each other. Addell Austin remarks that these overlapping dialogues and interruptions “show that family members are often more interested in giving their own opinions than fully listening to and considering the concerns of others” (3). Every one is trying to force his or her voice on others. This eventually leads to the failure of communication in the family. This family needs a common language that can bind everyone together.

In the play, Fred realizes that “food” is the “only common language” between him and Pa (Chin, *The Chicken Coop* 85). Every type of food signifies a message and the silent emotional communication between the two. In fact, food is the common language of this Chinese migrant family, too. The only harmonious moment in the play is when everyone is eating at the dinner table. Their common diet helps them put away their conflicts. Linda Keller Brown and Kay Mussell note that “Foodways bind individuals together, define the limits of the group’s outreach and identity, distinguish in-group from out-group, serve as a medium of inter-group communication, celebrate cultural cohesion, and produce a context for performance of group rituals” (5). In other words, food has the ability to connect the individuals in ethnic groups. It can even breach the border between different ethnic groups. The Mama Fu Fu cookbook in *The Year of the Dragon* establishes a link between Chinese migrant community and the American public. However, it is questionable whether this intercommunication is successful. Brown and Mussell have also noticed this problem and write that “Mainstream Americans frequently use foodways as a factor in the identification of subcultural groups and find in the traditional dishes and ingredients of ‘others’ who eat differently from themselves a set of convenient ways to categorize ethnic and regional character” (3). The categorization of different foodways often leads to stereotypes. When Fred introduces Chinese food to his tour in front of Chinese restaurants, he specifically caters to the American tourists’ anticipation of something exotic with

a lot of exaggeration (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 77). Obviously, this is not the correct way for the tourists to learn the real Chinese migrant culture.

This is a major message that Frank Chin wishes to tell his American audience. What they see as tourists in Chinatown streets on festivals can never represent the real situation in Chinese migrant families. Chin separates the setting of *The Year of the Dragon* into two parts: one is the Chinese New Year parade outside the Eng's apartment, and the other is the interior of Eng's home. The celebratory music and firecracker outside creates a fantasized and theatrical Chinatown. It contrasts with the realistic and tragic depiction of a Chinese migrant family. This play provides outsiders a chance to peek into the lamentable Chinese family relation behind the glamorous mask of Chinatown. This image is sad and shocking, yet it is the reality.

After discussing the relationships in ordinary Chinese migrant families, let us shift our focus to a special type of Chinese immigrants—"paper immigrants" or "paper sons". The Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 greatly reduced the chance for Chinese immigrants to enter America in the following twenty years. However, the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco brought Chinese immigrants new hope. Although the earthquake destroyed most parts of the poorly-built Chinatown, the fire it caused also burned the San Francisco City Hall. A large number of Chinese immigrants claimed that their records in the City Hall were lost in the fire and "registered many many sons, developing a system of derivative citizenship that circumvented the Exclusion Act" (Ng, "My" 116). This system gave them opportunities to forge immigration documents to prove that the coming Chinese immigrants were their children. These immigrants are usually called "paper immigrants" or "paper sons". So, strictly speaking, they were illegal immigrants in America. They faced the risk of deportation once their original identity was exposed. They lived in fear and lies most of the time. It was almost impossible for Chinese paper immigrants to have an ordinary home and family life.



Fae Myenne Ng's second book *Steer toward Rock* reveals Chinese paper immigrants' hidden past. It is a memoir based on the true experience of Ng's father. In 1940, Ng's father "paid four thousand dollars and bought the fictitious slot of fourth son to a farmer in California's Central Valley. He was sixteen. To Have Trust was his new name" (Ng, "My" 116). In 1965, he "confessed his derivative citizenship and became one of 13,895 confessors. In total, 22,083 people were exposed and 11,294 potential derivative citizenships were closed" (Ng, "My" 118). Through this book, Ng commemorates not only her father's traumatic past but those of all Chinese paper immigrants. Ng remarks that, "the central theme of my novel, *Steer Toward Rock*, was about the devastating effect of the Chinese Confession Program on one family. ... I was also astounded at the simple heroism of men who ask little and exhibit supreme perseverance in a lose-lose situation" ("My" 119). In this book, Ng sympathetically depicts these paper immigrants' "lose-lose situation" in their family life. No matter they confessed or not, they and their families faced the risk of deportation. Ng hopes that use this book can retell their hidden history and honor their bravery.

In *Steer toward Rock*, Ng's father appears as the main character Jack. Jack enters America in 1952 as a blood son of Yi-Tung Szeto by fabricating immigration documents. His birth parents sell Jack to Szeto because they are too poor to raise him up. In order to pay the four-thousand-dollar-trip from China to America, Jack has to work for Szeto for two years. Later Szeto arranges a fake marriage between Jack and Ilin Cheung. Jack works for Szeto in various jobs: bird boy, shoeshiner, butcher, etc. Jack falls in love with Joice Qwan, an independent American-born Chinese immigrant in San Francisco. In order to break away from the contract with Szeto and marry Joice, Jack joins the Chinese Confession Program started by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). In this program, Jack confesses his fake identity and relationship to Szeto. As a result, he loses his American citizenship. When Szeto knows about Jack's confession, he sends his thug to break Jack's left hand as a revenge. Joice bears Jack a daughter named Veda

but refuses to take care of her. With the help from Ilin, Jack brings up Veda. At the end of the book, Veda persuades Jack to be naturalized and become a legal citizen.

The major cause of Chinese paper immigrants' failed family relationship is their lack of identity. First, their birth parents use them as commodities to exchange for money. The time frame of *Steer toward Rock* is the Sino-Japanese War. When Jack leaves his biological family, he remembers "that day I walked out of my home village as the first Japanese bombs fell" (Ng, *Steer* 4). Under that extreme circumstance, it is common for poor families in China to sell children for food or money. When Jack goes back to see his birth mother for the last time before his departure for America, "whether for pain or in shame", she "refused to come and face [him], even as a shadow" (Ng, *Steer* 189). She denies the possibility for Jack to come back as a family member. Years later, Veda goes back to Jack's home village and finds his coaching book for passing the U.S. Custom. The coaching book contains the frequent questions that custom officers will ask and the answers to them. The book is never touched after Jack's departure. At this scene, Veda understands that her father "had not been lived there; that village was never home" (Ng, *Steer* 216). For Chinese paper immigrants like Jack, their home and family in China refuse to acknowledge their existence.

After they entered America, paper immigrants had to work in contracts. They lost the freedom to choose their jobs and even spouses. In *Steer toward Rock*, Louie, another paper immigrant, says hopelessly, "Have you ever counted the words that have kept you a coolie? The Flowery Kingdom has only one word for us: No. No to you" (Ng, 92). The labor contract robs their free will. If they break the contract, the labor owner will either report them to the U.S. government to be deported or punish them heavily. They are not different from slaves. Obligation and obedience are the yoke that hang around their necks. They do not have the freedom to choose their spouses and establish families like ordinary people.

Apart from that, the racial discrimination and hostility toward Chinese immigrants further limited paper immigrants' life within the boundary of Chinatown. Ng describes how paper immigrants felt hopeless to leave Chinatown: "We looked out on the world as though we were in a glass globe. There was this mystery and wonder about the 'outside' and a desire to leave, but a feeling, too, that you couldn't break out" (Holt 2). Because if they left the shelter of Chinatown, there would be a higher chance to meet immigration officers. Deportation would await them once their fabricated identity was revealed. If they had families in America, they would be separated again with them.

In *Steer toward Rock*, Jack sees a chance to break away from his labor contract and fake identity: joining the Chinese Confession Program. He thinks this will help him regain freedom and chase his true love Joice. However, after joining Chinese Confession Program, Jack still loses Joice. What is worse, he loses his citizenship, job, and even his left hand. This federal program started in 1956 and ended in 1965. Its purpose was to encourage illegal Chinese American immigrants to report each other to the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Thousands of confessors had lost their citizenship but were allowed to "stay in the country" (Hunnicut 17). Ng's father was one of them. According to Ng, it was not a "confession" program, but a "confusing" program. First, "there was no clear reason to confess and no clear safety in not confessing" (Ng, "My" 117). Then, "the Confession Program promised immunity from prosecution and deportation; the Confessor had to surrender his passport, agree to be 'amenable to deportation,' and was required to name all members of his false and true family. One lone Confessor could ruin the entire clan" (Ng, "My" 117). Ng's explanation reveals the hypocrisy in the program. It could not guarantee any safety or legal status for the confessors, rather it produced and intensified the distrust within paper immigrants' families.

Therefore, due to their fabricated identity, traumatic experience and the hostile laws in America, most Chinese paper immigrants were not able to establish normal families. At the

beginning of *Steer toward Rock*, Jack introduces his complex “family” relationship: “The woman I loved wasn’t in love with me; the woman I married wasn’t a wife to me. Ilin Cheung was my wife on paper. In deed, she belonged to Yi-Tung Szeto. In debt, I also belonged to him. He was my father, paper, too” (Ng 3). This complicated net of relationships underlines that, in fact, Jack’s “family” is a combination of patriarchy and labor contract. Szeto is the patriarch and the labor owner. He owns Jack as both a long-term laborer and an obedient son. Every New Year and Harvest Moon Festival, Jack has to visit the “Father” and bring him gifts (Ng, *Steer* 7). Thus, Jack’s relationship with Szeto is not a familial one but more of an owner and slave.

Although Jack can not marry at his will, he is a brave paper immigrant. He decides to release himself from the contract and pursue his true love, Joice. However, Joice belongs to another group of Chinese Americans. Different from Jack, she is born in San Francisco. Louie calls women like Joice “Bamboo Women”, because “they have a hollow inner stem that makes them blow this way and that” (Ng, *Steer* 49). In Louie’s opinion, Joice’s heart is empty without any tradition from the past, so she is rootless and easily swayed. Her legal American citizenship endows Joice with independence and freedom, which is beyond Jack’s reach. Thus, the marriage between Joice and Jack is doomed to failure.

In comparison, the paper marriage between Jack and Ilin is not built upon true love. Ilin is a paper immigrant, too. Szeto buys her to bear him a child. Since the marriage law in America permits a man to marry only one wife, and Szeto already has a barren wife, so Jack becomes the “stand-in husband” (Ng, *Steer* 77). The relation between Jack and Ilin is more like spiritual companions rather than a real marriage. Jack teaches Ilin the skills of a butcher to help her make a living. In return, she takes care of Veda like her own daughter. Thus, in Jack’s opinion, their relation “[i]s better than a real marriage” (Ng, *Steer* 176). Without the other’s support, neither can persevere. They both understand a paper immigrant’s struggle. As Ilin tells Jack, “We are the same, we are alone in the world” (Ng, *Steer* 86). Loneliness binds them together. They are

“orphans—without care, without purpose, without love and without devotion— [their] only concern was with the sun rising and sun setting” (Ng, *Steer* 98). Being deserted by their birth parents, having no freedom to build their own families, and hiding themselves from the search for illegal immigrants turn these Chinese paper immigrants into orphans and living ghosts. Their only hope lies in their next generation.

In *Steer toward Rock*, after losing his job, marriage, and a left hand, Jack realizes that all he can do is to make the best out of his daughter. He feels proud and hopeful that Veda is strong, independent, and capable. In his eyes, she is “a shark, with a long stride, a determined glance and a destination” cutting “through the people horizon like a blade” (Ng, *Steer* 168). This image of a shark corresponds to the book title “*Steer toward Rock*”. Veda is as confident as a shark in her American life. Jack believes that his daughter “ha[s] found her way to walk in the world” (Ng, *Steer* 168). Therefore, he trusts his daughter that she is able to steer their family out of insecurity and trauma.

Throughout the book, Jack mentions the teachings of the Old Traveler more than once. The Old Traveler builds the Common House for the village where Jack is adopted in China (Ng, *Steer* 114). He gives Jack not only a lotus bean cake, also the traditional Chinese philosophy of living a good life (Ng, *Steer* 114-15). Jack carries it from China to America crossing the Pacific Ocean. It has given him strength when he is lost and desperate. He hopes to pass it to his daughter before he “enter[s] the Netherworld” (Ng, *Steer* 115). It is Jack’s gift to Veda to guide her future life. In return, Veda’s gift to her father is his American citizenship. She takes his father “across another river”(Ng, *Steer* 242), and gives him a chance to start a new life. This form of gift exchange between family members exists in many cultures and civilizations.

In *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, Marcel Mauss points out that gifts in fact are “given and repaid under obligation” (1), and “what they exchange is not exclusively goods and wealth, real and personal property, and things of economic value. They

exchange rather courtesies, entertainments, ritual” and others (3). Chinese civilization also has a long tradition of exchanging gifts. In traditional Chinese philosophy of family relationship, it is obligatory for parents to raise up their children until they are economically independent; and when the parents grow old, it is the children’s responsibility to look after their parents. In the case of Chinese paper immigrants, one of the most precious gifts from the first generation immigrants to their children is the legal citizenship. This gift means freedom and independence. When the second generation grow up, it is time for them to lead their parents, paper immigrants like Jack, out of misery. However, the result also depends on Chinese paper immigrants’ attitude toward their traumatic past.

Similar to other Chinese immigrants, these paper immigrants also long for their roots and ancestry. Louis Wirth remarks that “once the individual is removed from the soil to which he and his institutions have been attached, he is exposed to the possibility of losing his character and disappearing as a distinct type” (286). For paper immigrants, their fabricated identity and the distance from China already diminish their sense of belonging. Roots and ancestry provide protection and support, which help them conquer the loneliness and insecurity in their migrant life. In *Steer toward Rock*, Jack says to Louie, “I can’t sleep in a storm”, to which the latter replies, “we China Boys have to root or we rot” (50). Yet, what are these paper immigrants’ roots?

The roots of ordinary Chinese immigrants are their past in China or Chinatown. Thus, going back to their roots is a way for immigrants to rediscover how they form the present identity. As Veda notices, whenever her father “despaired, [he] threatened to go back to China. It took being in China to understand what he meant: Returning to China was returning to the Mother” (Ng, *Steer* 211). Veda goes back to her father’s home village and meets Jack’s birth mother—The Ancient One. This is Veda’s journey to discover her family roots. She begins to understand the meaning of blood in a family. It is symbolized in the cup of tea she shares with

The Ancient One: “The warmth of the cup flowed through, water to water, hand to hand. Blood” (Ng, *Steer* 209). But Veda is not a paper immigrant. She is not the sold one whom the family try to forget. In fact, except for his father’s coaching book, nothing in the ancestral home “made measure or worth of [her] father’s beginnings here” (Ng, *Steer* 209). Maybe the ancestors do not want to see the book, so they store it in the very back of a drawer. Or maybe the book means nothing to them any more. This is extremely sad for a Chinese paper immigrant to be forgotten by his ancestors and roots. He has no home to which to return.

Although Veda calls her father’s coaching book “the book of lies” (Ng, *Steer* 209), it is still a book of Jack’s real past. At the end of the memoir, she eventually understands, “MY FATHER LIVED his story, tenacious” (Ng, *Steer* 241). The lies in the book already becomes a part of Jack’s undeniable past and identity. Veda agrees with her grandmother’s words, “*Stories became our ancestors, our Gods of memory*” (Ng, *Steer* 242). Since his parents deny his existence, Jack’s past is his only ancestor. After meeting The Ancient One, Veda retrieves her father’s past in the coaching book. It binds Veda and Jack together. Those stories of Jack’s past become the blood flowing in both Jack and Veda’s body.

However, many paper immigrants tend to hide their stories from others even from their children. First, it is painful to recall their traumatic past. Then, they are afraid that their past will become a burden to their children. In *Steer toward Rock*, Jack is unhappy about Joice telling Veda his story, because he thinks that “this was a story between lovers, this was not a story between father and daughter. [His] daughter did not need to swallow [his] sorrow” (Ng, *Steer* 190). Jack understands a paper immigrant’s sorrow. He does not want his only hope Veda to repeat his sorrowful past. This is another thing that Jack learns from the Old Traveler: “Telling bound; telling deepened aloneness. I never wanted my daughter bound to my history so I will never tell it to her. This was honoring ritual. It was forgetting not forgiving that completed repayment” (Ng, *Steer* 114-5). He does not want Veda to recompense by reliving his history.

Thus, Jack hides it from her. Richard Teleky remarks that “over time, the memory of even a traumatic event can be lost to silence” (212). Jack wishes to silence his past for the purpose of protecting his daughter. He says, “I want to free my daughter of any obligation to my history. Whatever I endured is not hers to ponder; how I survived is not hers to wonder; she will come upon enough heartbreak in her own life” (Ng, *Steer* 191). This time, Jack does not want to pass this gift, his history, to Veda. Because, as a ritual, Veda will need to pay him back. Mauss also points out that “in theory ... gifts are voluntary but in fact they are given and repaid under obligation” (1). If Veda receives Jack’s history, she will carry it throughout her whole life. But Jack believes that this obligation should not prevent her starting a new life.

However, in this memoir, Veda hears her father’s story from Joice. As her father predicts, Veda does pay him back. The first “gift” that Veda repays Jack is her visit to the ancestral village. After the visit, she is able to read and feel her father’s story. Furthermore, she begins to understand why her father hides his stories. This corresponds to her Grandmother’s words: “Telling was not necessarily loving. Once spoken, words take on a power beyond time” (Ng, *Steer* 241). As repayment, she decides not to tell Jack about her visit to China. Her father’s story lies safely in the back of that drawer in the Ancestral home. His story “was home. The story rested where it began. The story was safe” (Ng, *Steer* 211). Bringing the story out will only hurt her father again.

The second “gift” that Veda repays her father is her inheritance of a paper immigrant’s obligation. Anna Pehkoranta points out that “What Veda inherits from her father is in fact more than a lost biological past or a forgotten cultural heritage: the real legacy is narrative agency – the freedom and responsibility of telling her own story and writing her own history as a second generation Chinese American” (82). When she sees the villagers in the ancestral village are still eager to sell babies, Veda resolves not to have a child forever. Because after her trip to China, she already starts to carry her father’s burden of the past. If she has her child, this burden will be



passed on again. She tells Ilin, “it’s my only protection” (Ng, *Steer* 238). She wishes to protect this paper immigrant’s family by refusing an heir.

Of course, the third “gift” that Veda returns to her father is his naturalization. At first Jack is reluctant to go. Yet he agrees later only to fulfill the obligation of returning Veda’s gift. He asks himself:

*Will I?*

A new plant becomes naturalized to a new land.

*Maybe* my daughter hopes naturalization will give me the safety to set root.

*Maybe* my naturalization can give her a sanctuary in trusting that her father will not be deported. (Ng, *Steer* 190)

It is for his daughter’s good that Jack decides to let go of his past and move forward to a new life. He says, “My story is native to our history but it need not be our root. A naturalized plant is new life. So I hand over my story. Let her tell. Let her not. Let her find her way through the story so that it frees her” (Ng, *Steer* 191). Through naturalization, Jack hands over his past and future life to Veda. She steers the boat of her family forward.

This action corresponds to the image in the book title “Steer toward Rock”. It comes from Jack’s memory of his mother taking him across a river:

The boat moved downriver chasing northern light, they were heading toward a big rock that rose out of the river like a fist. Three characters were painted on the rock and when his mother read them out, her voice wavered.

*Toward*

*I*

*Come.*

Trust rock, she told him. Empty your heart, she taught him. Break fear upon rock. Like the river masters, surrender to nature. Go toward fear. Trust fear. Steer toward rock. (Ng, *Steer* 112-13)

A long time ago, Jack’s mother has already taught him to let go of any fear and look forward.

The big rock here symbolizes the unknown danger in the future. One needs to trust oneself and steer directly toward the unknown. In this way, the fear of unknown will go away naturally. This is exactly the same situation when Jack goes through the process of naturalization. Naturalization is the big rock in front of Jack. It opens up infinite uncertainties. Jack uses this “most elusive

phrase” — “The heart never travels” — to encounter “the infinite possibilities of the unanswerable” (Ng, *Steer* 216). This “heart” is a paper immigrant’s trust and courage. May Friedman and Silvia Schultermandl call this quality the “transnational sensibility”, which “sees a lack of fixity as simultaneously inevitable and rich in possibility” and is “both a methodology and a mode of enquiry: a way of seeing and deliberately *not-knowing*, a way of inhabiting the spaces between questions and answers” (5). Paper immigrants’ lives are uncertain and unpredictable. They are not able to foresee or control their fate. However, they fearlessly steer toward the unknown with their incomplete families.

As a daughter of a paper immigrant, Ng writes that “I have my father’s rage but I don’t have the history that allows my rage to embody or engender compassion. ... I know this: I become an American when I feel free to tell, not confess, my story. We are Americans when we can report to the authorities without signing over our lives” (“My” 119). Thus, apart from sympathizing Chinese paper immigrants’ sorrow, Ng wishes to use this memoir to tell and commemorate how much they have sacrificed to have an ordinary family and life. Their anger toward the unfair treatments needs to be heard.

Through reading Fae Myenne Ng’s *Steer toward Rock*, we feel Chinese paper immigrants’ pain in their broken families and homeless state. However, this homelessness is not limited to paper immigrants who are robbed of legal identity. In fact it is a constant situation that haunts every Chinese immigrant’s heart. Many writers have written about Chinese immigrants’ homelessness. One of the most well-known Chinese Canadian writer Ying Chen is an excellent example. In her writings, she extends the definition of homelessness to immigrants in general. As Emile Talbot remarks, Ying Chen’s works have “produced narratives that increasingly probe existential issues that are universal in their reach” (125). In other words, her meditation on homelessness extends to all immigrants. They all face the question of how to survive without the warmth and comfort of home.

Ying Chen left China for Quebec in 1989 to study creative writing at McGill University (Redouane 1055). Since then, she began to write in French. In 1992, she published her first novel in French *La Mémoire de l'eau* which immediately attracted literary critics' attention. Her later works include *Les Lettres chinoises* (1993), *L'ingratitude* (1995), *Immobile* (1998), *Le Champ dans la mer* (2002), *Querelle d'un squelette avec son double* (2003), and *Quatre Mille Marches: un rêve chinois* (2004). In all the above books, she contemplates the implications of homelessness. Ying Chen connects homelessness to the theme of exile, no matter whether it is in China or outside China, whether physical exile or internal exile. According to Betty McLane-Iles, exile in Ying Chen's books means:

uprootal from the old, the archaic, and the stagnant; exile is revolt against what limits, stifles, or oppresses. It is both liberation and solitude. However, in modern culture, it is also irreversible movement away from permanence and continuity. Exile is characterised by disruption and oppression by the perpetual sense of homelessness and uncertainty it imposes. (224)

This interpretation underlines the homeless state during exile. It is a state of being constantly on the road, troubled by solitude and uncertainty. As a Chinese immigrant in Canada, Ying Chen encounters this homeless state as well. Her writings become an approach for her to examine Chinese immigrants' homelessness. As a result, she is often included in the writer group "l'écriture migrante" in Québec.

Starting from the 1980s, Québec has become a cradle for migrant literature (Barreiro 68). The welcoming environment attracted writers from all over the world to settle in Québec. Their works about migrant experience share many themes in common, such as exile, displacement, rebirth, and plural identity. Soon a new category called "l'écriture migrante" is created to categorize these migrant writers' works. Some scholars tend to take Régine Robin's novel *La Québécoise* (1983) as the origin of "l'écriture migrante", because it has given the migrant narrator such a strong voice to tell the difficulties that an immigrant has to endure (Labelle 39). Maude Labelle explains the choice of the words "écriture" and "migrante" instead of "littérature"

and “immigration”: because «l’ ‘écriture’ implique un processus, un mouvement, alors que le vocable ‘littérature’ renvoie à un corpus d’oeuvres établi et fixé par un choix institutionnel»; and «la ‘migration’, contrairement à l’ ‘immigration’, insiste sur le déplacement plutôt que sur la fixité du point de départ ou d’arrivée» (40). Therefore, two words “écriture” and “migrante” emphasizes the unstable, ever-changing, and wandering state that is essential to the migrant experience. Robert Berrouët-Oriol also defines “l’écriture migrante” as «les écritures migrantes forment un micro-corpus d’oeuvres littéraires produites par des sujets migrants: ces écritures sont celles du corps et de la mémoire; elles sont, pour l’essentiel, travaillées par le référent massif, le pays laissé ou perdu, le pays réel ou fantasmé constituant la matière première de la fiction» (12). According to Berrouët-Oriel’s definition, “l’écriture migrante” includes both realistic and fictional genres that deal with the topics of lost memory and homeland. This definition again matches immigrants’ interior and exterior homelessness.

When reading Ying Chen’s books, it is easy to notice her reflection on the issues that are persistent in “l’écriture migrante” in Québec. She questions the significance of homeland, the relationship between memory and reality, the influence of root and displacement, the formation of migrant identity etc. Her ideas offer us multiple points of view to observe and understand Chinese immigrants’ homelessness. Among her works, there are two that specifically focus on Chinese immigrants, while the rest are stories set in China but are still about the theme of exile. One is the epistolary novel *Les Lettres chinoises*. The other is her essay collection *Quatre Mille Marches: un rêve chinois*. In the next part, I will examine these two books to explain Ying Chen’s thoughts on immigrants’ homelessness.

*Les Lettres chinoises* is an epistolary novel between the major characters. It has been reprinted three times: “the original 1993 version and subsequent 1998 and 2003 editions, which have the same ISBN number” and content (Hendry 2). There are six letter writers in the first version: Yuan, Sassa, Da Li, Yuan’s father, Yuan’s Aunt Louise, and Yuan’s friend Nicolas. The

later two editions eliminate the voices from Yuan's father, aunt, and friend. Thus there are twelve lesser letters in the 1998 and 2003 editions. In this dissertation, I choose the 1998 edition, because the three peripheral characters, Yuan's father, aunt, and friend, are not immigrants themselves and their letters are not pertinent to the themes of exile and immigrants' homelessness. Therefore, the newer editions are more concentrated on these two themes.

*Les Lettres chinoises* is based upon the love relationship between Yuan and his fiancée Sassa. Yuan goes to Montreal to study and leaves Sassa in Shanghai. They write each other letters to maintain their relationship across the geographical and temporal distance. In his letters, Yuan expresses his desire to reunite with Sassa in Montreal. What is more, he writes about his reflections on both the positive and negative migrant experience in Montreal. Sassa at first is willing to leave China and prepares to apply for her passport. Yet, the loss of her application document and her own deteriorating health prevent her from leaving. Da Li, Sassa's good friend, also goes to Montreal to study and later falls in love with Yuan. She shares her feeling towards Yuan with Sassa without revealing Yuan's name. Yuan's ambivalent attitude and her own mobility lead to Da Li's decision to leave Montreal for Paris. The three characters' letters express Ying Chen's various views on immigrants' homeless state, for instance, the loss of one's home country, the exile in one's home country, the adjustment to a new country, how to survive in this homeless state, the freedom in homelessness, just to name a few. These are the fundamental questions to all immigrants. They are also the major topics in Ying Chen's essay collection *Quatre Mille Marches: un rêve chinois*.

*Quatre Mille Marches: un rêve chinois* collects Ying Chen's thirteen short pieces, including several genres, such as travel logs, letters, short essays, and lectures. It gives Ying Chen a chance to clarify herself and explain the ideas in her previous works. In this book, she discusses many issues that are pertinent to immigrants, for example the exile experience, the significance of homeland and root, patriotism, identity, ethnic writing, and of course immigrants'

homelessness. Here, we will mainly focus on Ying Chen's interpretation of immigrants' homelessness through reading her *Quatre Mille Marches: un rêve chinois* and *Les Lettres chinoises* side by side.

Many scholars tend to categorize Ying Chen's books as exile writing<sup>6</sup>. Although the categorization is not completely wrong, still it is generalizing the multiple deeper issues underneath the broad topic of exile. Immigrants' homelessness is a very good example. In *Quatre Mille Marches: un rêve chinois* Ying Chen has shared her idea of exile:

aller d'un endroit à l'autre n'est pas encore un exil. Le véritable exil, c'est quand on a perdu son père et qu'on devient orphelin. Le vrai exil c'est quand on a le sentiment de passer d'un temps à l'autre, d'un siècle à l'autre, d'un instant à l'autre, d'un pas à la fois léger et lourd, ne pouvant ou ne voulant régler le décalage. (76)

The exile in her mind is not necessarily a geographical concept of which some scholars speak. Rather it is a state of being lost like an orphan in both place and time. This is in fact a state of homelessness. The homeless immigrants try to keep up with the time and progress at both their home country and migrating country, but feel being abandoned by both. This interpretation of exile matches Julia Kristeva's depiction of an "étranger" oscillating between his motherland and the adopted nation:

[Il n'appartient] à aucun lieu, aucun temps, aucun amour. L'origine perdue, l'enracinement impossible, la mémoire plongeante, le présent en suspens. L'espace de l'étranger est un train en marche, un avion en vol, la transition même qui exclut l'arrêt. De repères, point. Son temps ? Celui d'une résurrection qui se souvient de la mort et d'avant, mais manque la gloire d'être au-delà : juste l'impression d'un sursis, d'avoir échappé. (17-18)

Kristeva gives a more detailed depiction here. Beyond being lost in time and place, she summarizes the two sides of an homeless exile: on the optimistic side, it is a new birth; but on

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<sup>6</sup> Refer to Silvie Bernier's article "Ying Chen: S'exiler de soi" published in the journal *Francofonie*, Volume 37, Autumn 1999.

pessimistic side, it necessitates escape and requires fortitude to survive. This idea exists in Ying Chen's books as well. The character Yuan in *Les Lettres chinoises* is a representative.

To sum it up, Ying Chen's understanding of immigrants' homelessness has two aspects: one is geographical or spatial; the other is the temporal. The first aspect shows that immigrants do not belong to either home country or adopted country. The second aspect, as the result of the first aspect, reveals their lost state in time between past and future. The geographical detachment makes them want to preserve the lost past in their home country and grasp the uncertain future in the adopted country. This effort transforms their homelessness into an interior and spiritual exile. To further develop these two aspects, I will incorporate Ying Chen's ideas in *Quatre Mille Marches: un rêve chinois* as supplementary evidence.

The first piece in *Quatre Mille Marches: un rêve chinois* is a travel journal entitled "Carnet de voyage en Chine". It records Ying Chen's trip back to Shanghai after leaving China for eight years. She writes about her emotion when she was walking again in the streets of Shanghai:

ma tête est complètement désordonnée. Je croyais pouvoir éprouver quelques fortes émotions et une grande envie de revivre un passé très long et tout de même proche — nous sommes là pour cela. ... dans une ville que je ne peux plus appeler mienne. Tout paraît injustement dépourvu de sens, et même laid, quand on se trouve à la fin d'une longue agonie d'amour, dans un état d'épuisement. (*Quatre* 14)

Shanghai is the place where she grew up and lived for twenty-eight years. Even being away for only eight years, she already has the impression that this is not her home any more. She feels lost and disoriented in the familiar streets, which are also unfamiliar at the same time. She tries to find the images of Shanghai in her mind, such as the old alleys and chess players in the parks, but they all have changed.

This is a vivid depiction of many Chinese immigrants' emotion when they eventually go back to their birthplace in the home country. They long to return and retrieve the home in their memory, yet what they see there in reality only saddens them. They try to match their memory of home to the actual place in the present time. However, the fact is that there is a gap between the

memory and the present. In Ying Chen's *Les Lettres chinoises*, the hero Yuan laments that «Le passé est une chose. Le passé ressuscité en est une autre. Donc, il est toujours là, notre passé, mort dans nos mains, insaisissable mais indélébile, utile seulement quand on y lit notre destin» (90). Memory records the home in the past. But the actual place, which immigrants call “home”, keeps changing after their departure. They reconstruct an image of the “home” based on their memory of its past. This reconstruction, in Lin Tzu-Yin's words, is «vraisemblable mais jamais vrai» (55). It is only a fantasy built on their memory and imagination. It represents only a small fraction of the place in history but not the whole. Therefore, the present reality deprives immigrants of the home in their memory even if they have a chance to go back.

When they live in the new country, Chinese immigrants do not feel at home either. In *Quatre mille marches*, Ying Chen retells a very ironic incident that happened to her at the Toronto airport. At that time, she already obtained her Canadian passport. Unexpectedly, she was stopped by a custom officer immediately after her arrival. Later, the officer searched her and her luggage even though she had presented her Canadian passport. Her Asian face alone made her a target of suspicion. Though some Chinese immigrants have lived a very long time in their new countries, their faces are constantly reminding others of their alien origins. This reflects that these immigrants' lives in the current country are not always welcoming. Compared to their lost home in memory, a more uncertain future is waiting for them.

Thus, these Chinese immigrants wander geographically and spiritually between their original country and the current country, between the past and the present. In *Quatre mille marches*, Ying Chen describes this state as «mi-chemin»: «Je me trouve à mi-chemin entre mon point de départ et mon ailleurs. Ma destinée est cassée en morceaux. Je suis et je ne suis pas» (31). Their starting point is forever gone, and their destination is never arriving. This paradoxical state of in-betweenness is also called “l'entre-deux”. It is a “socio-psychological state of being between two entities, whether it be languages, genders, places, images, or between



life and death” (Silvester 409). The “l’entre-deux” that Ying Chen writes about focuses on immigrants’ floating state between nations, culture, and time. They, including herself, are unable to bond to or «s’accommoder à un temps et à un lieu» (Ying, *Quatre* 85). In this ambiguous and chaotic state, Chinese immigrants are homeless orphans who are lost in memory and time.

Then how should Chinese immigrants face this homeless or “mi-chemin” state? In *Les Lettres chinoises*, Ying Chen creates three main characters, Yuan, Sassa, and Da Li, to illustrate how they react to their distinct homeless circumstances. At the same time, the letters of the three narrators also reflect Ying Chen’s understanding of immigrants’ homelessness in this «époque d’exil» (*Les Lettres* 36).

Starting from Yuan, he belongs to the immigrants who wish to take root in the new country while simultaneously maintaining the connection to their old country. As Eileen Silvert notes, Yuan “finds himself in a hybrid place and time, in a kind of entre-deux (in between), where he is nothing but process, passage, and movement, both unstable and unformed, but always moving toward something” (228). His migrant experience in Canada exemplifies the homeless “mi-chemin” state we discussed above. His tendency of “always moving toward something” reflects his desire to settle down eventually.

At first, Yuan enjoys the new environment in Montréal. For him, this signifies his new birth. He writes excitedly to Sassa that «J’ai l’impression d’avoir rajeuni. Je vis comme un nouveau-né» (Ying, *Les Lettres* 17). The new birth opens up countless possibilities for him to start all over. This contrasts to Yuan’s former life in China. In fact, Yuan leaves China for Canada because he feels the latter will give him more freedom. He explains that «J’ai voulu me libérer un peu en quittant Shanghai» (Ying, *Les Lettres* 21). Of course, freedom does not mean liberation from problems to Yuan. Eileen Silvert points out that “Yuan claims to be reborn in the intersection of cultures. Because he lacks the shared history of the Québécois, one could say that he reads his new surroundings from the unsettled and unsettling point of view of a

stranger” (219). Thus when he begins to merge into the local life, Yuan finds problems in this country of freedom as well.

The first problem he encounters is at school. Although he has studied French in China, he still has difficulties in his classes. He writes that «je n’arrive pas encore à répondre au professeur, parce que très souvent je ne comprends pas les questions. Mes réflexes semblent ralentir depuis que je suis ici» (Ying, *Les Lettres* 17). Language is a common problem for many new immigrants, even for those who studied it previously. What they learnt in their home country from textbooks and in classrooms is different from how they will really use the language in the new country. This is only the beginning of a series of challenging adaptation.

In *Les Lettres chinoises*, after living in Montréal for some time, Yuan begins to see other problems in spite of the freedom he enjoys every day. He describes that:

Je n’acceptais surtout pas qu’ils essaient de me faire vivre à leur façon.  
Maintenant, je suis libre, je pourrais presque tout faire chez moi. Personne ne me dérangerait. Je suis le seul responsable de moi-même.... On m’en accorderait l’entière liberté à condition que je ne dérange pas les autres. N’est-ce pas ce que j’ai toujours voulu et que j’apprécie encore? Pourtant, je commence à avoir peur de cette liberté qui m’attire comme un trou inconnu. (Ying, *Les Lettres* 35)

This description reveals two problems that disturb Yuan. First, as a foreigner, he has to conform to the local ways of living and change himself. Second, the freedom he dreamed of further estranges him from the local community. He is free but without ties. This contradicts his wish to take root and live a stable life in Canada. He is already looking for a job when he is at school. He tells Sassa that «maintenant je cherche un patron à Montréal. Je serais employé, discipliné, payé ou congédié» (Ying, *Les Lettres* 21). A job and stable income is his priority to take root in Montréal.

Yuan’s love affair with Sassa’s friend Da Li also reflects his desire to take root. Although neither Yuan nor Da Li reveal their relationship to Sassa, Sassa sees Yuan’s wish to build a home from Da Li’s portrayal of him. Sassa replies to Da Li that «Un petit détail dans ta lettre m’a

frappée: ton amoureux désire parfois être consolé quand il se sent 'orphelin' là-bas» (Ying, *Les Lettres* 87). The free atmosphere in North America inspires Yuan's fancy for a love affair. He may have thought of taking this chance to settle down with Da Li in Montréal. However, his deep love to Sassa stops Yuan from crossing that line.

Yuan's constant correspondence with Sassa displays his need to maintain the connection to his past origins. She is Yuan's fiancée, which symbolizes his destined home and belonging. Although the distance between the two countries separates them, Yuan still preserves the hope that they will eventually unite in Canada. In his letters, he keeps persuading her to prepare for the reunion in the future and do not give up her hope. He begs Sassa that «Mais comment être moi-même sans toi? Je suis comme un cerf-volant qui vole très loin, vraiment très loin, et dont la corde est tes mains. Si tu lâches la corde, où ira-t-il, ce cerf-volant?» (Ying, *Les Lettres* 133). He compares himself to a flying kite whose string is held in Sassa's hand. He is afraid that she will let go of the string, which signifies his link to his love and also his original root in China. In that case, Yuan will truly become a homeless orphan.

From examining Yuan's relation with Da Li and Sassa, it is clear that Yuan is an immigrant who wants to take root and have a home yet paradoxically yearns for freedom. Yuan's admiration of birds, especially migratory birds, illustrates his characteristics well. He explains to Sassa that:

J'admire ces oiseaux qui voyagent à travers l'espace et le temps, construisant partout leurs nids pour chanter leurs chansons. Pour s'envoler, il faut qu'ils sachent se déposséder, surtout de leur origine. Ils ne considèrent pas leurs nids comme leur propriété ni comme leur raison d'être. Voilà pourquoi ils ne connaissent pas la nostalgie ni n'éprouvent de rancune à l'endroit de leur nouveau pays. Au fond, ils n'ont pas de pays, puisque leur coeur simple ne connaît pas les frontières. Et ils sont heureux. (Ying, *Les Lettres* 38-39)

This depiction of the birds reflects Yuan's vision of an ideal state for immigrants. Birds are free to build their nests wherever they feel at home. They have no restrictions, such as borderlines or nationality. Also, they are not afraid of abandoning their old nests, because their new nests are not different from their old ones. Nonetheless, we cannot neglect Yuan's unconscious repetition

of the birds' nests. Although he wishes to be free as a bird, still he needs to have a home like a bird's nest. Contrary to Yuan's wish, at the end of the story, Da Li leaves Canada and Sassa stops writing to him. This ending may imply that immigrants like Yuan are unable to establish their home whether in the new country or holding on to their old roots.

Da Li is an opposite kind of immigrant to Yuan. She never wants to take root or settle down. She describes herself to Sassa that «Je n'aime pas les racines. Je les trouve les unes comme les autres laides, têtues, à l'origine des préjugés, coupables de conflits douloureux, destructeurs et vains» (Ying, *Les Lettres* 83). To her, roots are burdens and ties that prevent her from moving on. In Beatrice Bouvier-Laffitte and Anne Prouteau's words, Da Li is a «personnage en errance, est la figure de la quête» (62). Thus, in the book, she keeps moving from Shanghai to Beijing to Montréal and to Paris. Whenever she feels that the current place can not please her anymore, she chooses to leave. She tells Sassa that she left China because «Je me suis rendu compte alors que mon pays n'était plus très bon. Je suis donc partie» (Ying, *Les Lettres* 74). For the same reason, she leaves Montréal for Paris.

Sassa understands Da Li's nature and compares her to a ball: «Elle est comme une petite boule de verre qui roule facilement. Elle avance, elle glisse, elle saute parfois, et elle s'arrête rarement en chemin. Elle n'a pas besoin de le connaître pour aller jusqu'au bout» (Ying, *Les Lettres* 19). Sassa's words explain Da Li's consistent wandering. Roots take away the freedom that Da Li enjoys. Rosalind Silvester remarks, "replacing roots with routes offers a much more comfortable existence for those between worlds" (412). In perceiving herself as a glass ball, Da Li is able to glide and move easily to wherever she feels comfortable. However, as we discussed previously, immigrants do not truly feel at home no matter where they go. Therefore, Da Li needs to change continuously from one location to another without a final destination.

Da Li's wandering between countries exemplifies the idea of "l'entre-deux". It «désigne un état inaccompli en constante transformation et en mouvance perpétuelle sans lieu d'ancrage ou

d'enracinement. Il semble que l'exilé flotte dans un espace nomade puisque rien ne le fixe plus là-bas et que rien ne le rive encore ailleurs» (Lin 47). Da Li flows in this fluid state between nations and cultures. As De Certeau writes, "To walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper" (103). So Da Li's wandering state shows that immigrants like her do not belong to anywhere. Nonetheless, different from some immigrants, she in fact enjoys this process of always looking for a better place. She tells herself that «naître ou mourir dans un endroit au lieu d'un autre n'est pas important. Seul importe de suivre le cours des choses» (Ying, *Les Lettres* 75). For her, the process of searching is more significant than the final destination, because during this process she is repeatedly renewing herself and obtaining more opportunities. Da Li's words match how Ying Chen describes the state of wandering in *Quatre mille marches*. She writes that «L'important est de continuer à marcher mais non d'arriver réellement. Ceux qui veulent arriver quelque part aspirent à une terre particulière. Or toutes les terres ont tendance à nous repousser ou à nous enfermer» (Ying, *Quatre* 32). Here Ying Chen emphasizes the importance of never arriving. Because once you arrive at a definite destination, it means that you have decided to attach yourself to that place and have enclosed yourself from all other possibilities.

Although Sassa has the chance to leave China as Yuan and Da Li, she chooses to stay in China eventually. Nevertheless, she still feels homeless even in her own home and country. She writes that «Je suis née étrangère dans mon propre pays» (Ying, *Les Lettres* 66). For Sassa, exile is not limited to geographical homelessness but also spiritual exile, which is her case. In her mind, «On n'a pas besoin d'aller à l'étranger pour devenir étranger» (Ying, *Les Lettres* 27). Once one feels estranged and isolated from the community and environment around him, he is becoming an "étranger". According to Julia Kristeva, an "étranger" is one who «ne fait pas partie du groupe, celui qui n'en est pas, l'autre» (139). This kind of homelessness is a form of detachment from one's own people and culture. It is an interior exile in contrast to Da Li and

Yuan's exterior exile. Sassa feels that this interior exile is more painful. She writes that «Il me semble qu'il est moins pénible de vivre comme étranger à Montréal qu'à Shanghai» (Ying, *Les Lettres* 144), because «Quand on ne se sent pas bien ailleurs, on blâme son exil et on se console avec les souvenirs de sa mère patrie, purifiés et embellis par l'imagination grâce à la distance et au temps écoulé. Mais quand on est étranger chez soi, on n'a aucun espace de retraite» (Ying, *Les Lettres* 27). In other words, for immigrants outside their home country, they can blame the new country and seek comfort from the nostalgia of their home country. But for these stay-at-home wanderers, they have no places to escape and receive no understanding even from their family.

Sassa has thought that leaving China may solve her problems, but does not go in the end. There are a few objective reasons, for instance the loss of her passport application and her sickness. What is more, after noticing Yuan's changes and affair with Da Li through letters, she sees no hope in this relationship. The spatial and temporal distance between them destroys her faith in love. However, perhaps the most important reason is her fear of breaking away from her roots in China. She writes to Yuan that «Les plantes sans racines ne vivent pas, ma chère» (Ying, *Les Lettres* 66). Sassa observes how Yuan's rootless state has changed him. Since she already feels homeless in her own country, it can be more difficult for her to live an uprooted life outside China. She explains that «Je préfère ne pas partir, parce que je n'ai pas autant de courage que toi. Je ne me suis jamais vraiment habituée à cette ville où j'ai vécu tant d'années. Comment pourrais-je aller faire face à un monde presque inconnu?» (Ying, *Les Lettres* 130). Many immigrants fear being homeless and rootless. It requires a great amount of courage to conquer this fear, «l'esprit et le courage des orphelins» in Sassa's words (Ying, *Les Lettres* 88). Like an orphan, one should be brave enough to give up his previous family and roots.

If we compare the three major characters in *Les Lettres chinoises* with Ying Chen, they reflect, to a large extent, Ying Chen's own homeless experience in different stages. In *Quatre*

*mille marches*, Ying Chen clarifies this relationship between her and her characters: «Je n'ai jamais été les personnages de mes romans, mais mes personnages sont toujours imprégnés de mon âme» (43). In other words, Ying Chen retells her migrant experience through the stories of her characters.

Similar to Yuan and Da Li, Ying Chen left China chasing freedom. Both Ying Chen and Yuan aspire to be free as a bird (Ying, *Quatre* 55). Later her move from Montréal to Vancouver mirrors Da Li's wandering nature. As LeBras asserts, Da Li is Ying Chen's "alter ego", embodying «une célébration de l'errance en soi» (146-47). Yet Ying Chen chooses to settle in Vancouver. She explains that «Pourtant je n'aime pas les départs et les voyages. J'ai toujours voulu un point d'attache, une habitude. Tout ce qui m'est familier me touche, me retient. ... Je n'ai plus ni le courage ni la force des vrais nomades» (Ying, *Quatre* 55). This feeling is identical to Yuan's wish to take root and feel attached and Sassa's lack of the courage to be an orphan.

Being an immigrant herself, Ying Chen does not know when and where she will eventually find her home, either. She sighs that «douze ans après la chute de ma coquille sur cette terre, je marche encore vers elle. J'habite sur une terre qui m'est très lointaine» (Ying, *Les Lettres* 66). After living in Canada for over twelve years, she still does not feel at home. So she questions whether there really is a home for immigrants. No doubt, Ying Chen denies the notion which takes Chinatown as Chinese immigrants' home. In her books, we rarely see any depiction of the Chinatowns in Canada. According to Gilles Dupuis, «Ying Chen choisit d'ailleurs sciemment de ne pas décrire ce quartier de Montréal, en se contentant de dénoter son existence» (104). In Ying Chen's mind, Chinatown is more like a place for tourists rather than a home for Chinese immigrants. In *Les Lettres chinoises*, for example, the only time that the Montréal Chinatown appears in this book is on a postcard that Yuan sends to Sassa (Ying 31). This postcard again satirizes the role of Chinatown. Even for Chinese immigrants, Chinatown means a tourist site on postcards rather than their home.

Perhaps Ying Chen can not provide a solution to other immigrants' homeless state. Yet for her, she finds her home in writing. In *Quatre mille marches*, Ying Chen confesses that «je commence aujourd'hui à m'attacher à un autre paysage où je me sens plus chez moi. Mon véritable foyer est là où je deviens ce que je veux être. Plus encore: mon vrai nid se trouve dans les mots, entre les lignes, dans ce presque-rien qu'on ne peut même pas désigner comme 'une place'» (12). The "autre paysage" about which she speaks is her writing. It is not a physical place but a formless state where she feels at home. Lin Tzu-Yin explains how writing provides comfort to Ying Chen as follows:

L'acte d'écrire s'avère indispensable pour surmonter l'exil puisque l'écriture facilite une réappropriation du temps et de l'espace de la part de l'écrivain, elle lui permet de visiter et de revisiter les souvenirs de son pays d'origine et de réactualiser la présence active du passé dans le présent. Par l'écriture, l'exilé entreprend une quête de soi pour se trouver ou se retrouver face à une multitude de réalités dépaysantes. (223)

Writing is Ying Chen's medium to reconnect her past to present. It is a way for her to rethink how she comes all the way from her multiple origins to the present state. It is her shelter in the "l'entre-deux", because in writing she is free from all the constraints such as nationality, culture, ethnicity etc. It is a state of just being herself.

Seeking shelter in writing is also symbolized in the epistolary genre of *Les Lettres chinoises*. Letters enable characters from different locations to communicate their thoughts and emotions. Writing and reading them is a way for immigrants to express themselves and receive comfort. According to Claude Drevet, the lack of communication can be a form exile: «Vivre loin des êtres qui nous sont chers est un exil. L'exil désigne donc la distance d'un lieu ou l'éloignement de certaines personnes particulièrement liées avec nous, que ce lien soit privé ou d'ordre public» (213). Yet, writing letters reestablishes the communication between them. It is a spiritual support that helps these immigrants survive. Beyond that, letters function as a link between the past and present. When the receiver reads the words on paper, he has access to the



writer's preservation of memory in the past. Thus, the letters become a symbol of spatial and temporal "l'entre-deux". For homeless immigrants, letters help them counter rootlessness and revive memory.

However, the homeless state is not necessarily a bad thing to immigrants. Homelessness distances immigrants from their past and present countries as an outsider. They are able to see a broader picture of the world. As the black poet Nikki Giovanni argues about black women: "our alienation is our great strength. Our strength is that we are not comfortable any place; therefore, we're comfortable *every place*. We can go any place on earth and find a way to be comfortable" (qtd. in Tate 70). To immigrants, there is no place to be their final home in this world. But this does not stop them from continuing their search for a better place, because their floating state signals more possibilities. On their road to finding a home, immigrants go through self-transformation as well. They are not just losing their past, but are also absorbing various new traits. This is a process of forming new identities. In Chapter three on Chinese immigrants' identity, I will discuss how Chinese immigrants form their unstable and hybrid identity.

### **Chapter 3. The effects of language on the experiences of Chinese immigrants**

Chapter 3 focuses on the question: How does language affect Chinese immigrants' lives.

There are three parts in this chapter. In part one, we will look into the linguistic barriers of first-generation Chinese immigrants. Many first-generation immigrants arrive in North America without much knowledge of the language of their new country whether it be English or French. This linguistic disadvantage brings them a great amount of anxiety. Early immigrants tended to reside themselves inside Chinese-speaking Chinatowns. Arnold Genthe's photographs of the Chinese signage in San Francisco's Chinatown reflect early immigrants' language environment in the 1890s and 1900s. After the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco, its Chinatown was renovated to attract more American tourists. Western culture gradually penetrated other Chinatowns in North America, too. Chinese immigrants inside the nation's Chinatowns had to face the issue of the English language, or in the case of Montreal both English and French, in their daily lives. The situation of contemporary first-generation Chinese immigrants is more challenging. Most Chinatowns have dispersed or lost their visible boundaries so that Chinese immigrants have no place to escape from their linguistic anxiety. Ha Jin's short story collection *A Good Fall* depicts how this linguistic anxiety influences contemporary first-generation immigrants.

In the second part of this chapter I focus on second-generation Chinese immigrants. They grew up in a mixed language environment. They may speak Cantonese or Chinese with their parents at home but English outside the family. Some speak English with Chinese accents. Their bilingual condition often creates confusion for second-generation immigrants insofar as language affects their identity. Frank Chin has created a few characters of second-generation Chinese immigrants in his two plays, *The Year of the Dragon* and *The Chickencoop Chinaman*. These characters reveal second-generation Chinese immigrants' straddling of two languages and, subsequently, their hybrid identity. In addition to a number of literary texts, Benjamin Chinn's

photographs of residents in San Francisco's Chinatown also exhibit the complex language environment of second-generation Chinese immigrants.

Part three specifically deals with the language of Chinese migrant writers. In his novel *A Free Life*, Ha Jin describes the linguistic challenges that many Chinese migrant writers encounter in their creative efforts. This work mirrors Ha Jin's ideas about what it is to write in a foreign language in his book of literary criticism *The Writer as Migrant*. To him, writing in another language is a unique way to express and confirm himself. This idea coincides with Ying Chen's explanation in *Quatre mille marches: Un rêve chinois* as to why she chooses to write in French. They both are searching their voice and language to express themselves in North America.

### 3.1. The language barrier of first-generation Chinese immigrants

Since the earliest Chinese immigrants in North America, language has been a constant issue in their lives. For the first-generation immigrants who knew little English before their arrival, language was often their largest barrier. It hinders their participation in every aspect of American society and culture: education, occupation, medical care, politics, and mobility. First-generation Chinese immigrants in different time periods have used different methods to overcome or cope with the language barrier. In the following part of this chapter, I will discuss the language situation of first-generation Chinese immigrants in two time periods: from the 1890s to the 1900s and from the 1990s to the present. For the first period, I refer to Arnold Genthe's photographs of San Francisco Chinatown. For the second period, I analyze Ha Jin's short story collection *A Good Fall*. These visual and literary texts help the reader and observer understand the language situation of first-generation Chinese immigrants in the past and present.

As I mentioned in Chapter One, the majority of the earliest Chinese immigrants in North America were farmers and laborers. They arrived in North America without much knowledge of the English language. When they looked for jobs, they had to rely on English-speaking brokers.

These brokers were usually earlier Chinese migrant merchants who already knew some English. According to Shih-shan Henry Tsai's book *The Chinese Experience in America*, many American mining companies would hire a broker to "recruit miners from among his relatives or fellow villagers. The employer would pay a lump sum to the broker who provided the daily necessities and dispensed wages to his crew. This system was also practiced for hiring in railroad construction, wheat harvesting, and in the canneries" (13). Mining, farming, fishery, and railroad construction were the most common occupations of the early Chinese immigrants. Due to the lack of direct communication between the English-speaking American employers and Chinese-speaking workers, Chinese immigrants were heavily exploited. For example, in the mining industry, on average, "a white laborer was paid \$35 a month plus board and lodging; a Chinese laborer, however, received between \$26 and \$35 per month and had to provide his own food and housing" (Tsai 16). In addition, Chinese laborers had to depend on the English-speaking brokers' supplies of food and housing. Therefore, what they eventually saved was even less, around "\$20 a month" (Tsai 16). Their language disadvantage made it difficult for these early Chinese immigrants to change the situation.

After the completion of the transcontinental railroads in the 1880s and the decline of the mining industry in North America, many Chinese immigrants lost their jobs. The already competitive job market became cut throat. Added to the racial discrimination against Chinese immigrants, a large number of American companies refused to employ them. A number of anti-Chinese movements forced Chinese immigrants to gather on the edges of towns and cities and establish their own separate settlements. In the densely populated Walnut Grove, California, Chinese immigrants even built their own town, Locke, which is "the only town founded by Chinese in America" (Kingston, "San" 38). In these strictly Chinese quarters, they spoke their own language, built temples, and opened stores and businesses. In this way, they preserved their own language and culture and thereby maintained their independence from the surrounding

English-speaking society. The need to learn English was also greatly reduced. In these neighborhoods, Chinese was the dominant language. Chinese billboards and signs were everywhere. The various services and businesses were operated by Chinese-speaking immigrants. The common language helped to spur growth in these areas. Among them, the biggest one is San Francisco's Chinatown.

The San Francisco Chinatown, in Will Irwin's words, was "a Tenderloin for the whole Chinese population of the Pacific Coast" (61): "Fish cutters from the northern salmon canneries, farmers from the Sacramento deltas, fruit pickers from the hot San Joaquin, gold washers from the mountains" — all came here to "enjoy themselves and to squander their earnings between seasons" (Irwin 62). Later, when the anti-Chinese movements forced them out of jobs, many moved to the San Francisco Chinatown to restart their lives anew. Although the buildings were constructed in typical western style, the atmosphere in the San Francisco Chinatown in the late nineteenth century was absolutely Chinese. Jack Chen describes it as follows:

bustling and noisy, with brightly colored lanterns, three-cornered pennants of yellow silk denoting restaurants, handsome calligraphy on sign boards, and bordered flags, a profusion of balcony and window plants, the smells and atmosphere of a Chinese marketplace, flowing costumes, hair in queues, and most of all the babble of familiar Cantonese dialects. (*The Chinese* 62)

In general, Chinese immigrants were able to see, read, hear, smell, and feel the traces of their home country in San Francisco Chinatown, including the Chinese language. The familiar Chinese calligraphy and Cantonese dialects formed the visual and acoustic milieu of Chinatown. Beyond that, their native language had penetrated into every aspect of their lives.

The Chinese-speaking San Francisco Chinatown provided a full range of facilities and services to its residents. There was no need for them to leave Chinatown. Christopher L. Salter gives a long list of the facilities and services in the Chinese language in San Francisco Chinatown that virtually cover a Chinese immigrant's entire life:

Birth at the Chinese hospital, education at the Chinese schools (in addition to required education in municipal or private schools), professional services of the law, medicine, insurance, realty, banks, even palm reading, are all available in the offices of Cantonese speaking Chinese within the nuclear area. Chinese books, movies, art, clothes, artifacts, food, liquor, are all available to Chinese with no English required in many places within five blocks of Portsmouth Square. Employment in garment factories, offices, and numerous small concerns is also open to only Cantonese speaking Chinese in the nuclear area. Even death can be dealt with in the vernacular without leaving Chinatown. (39)

From birth to death, Chinese immigrants were immersed in the Chinese language and atmosphere in San Francisco Chinatown. Except for the random American tourists and some English signs in the streets, they felt as if they were living in a Chinese city in China. Thus, the necessity to learn English was not so urgent.

However, San Francisco's Chinese immigrants in the late nineteenth century were not a homogenous group. In fact, there were several different Chinese dialects coexisting among the immigrants. As I pointed out in Chapter One, the most early Chinese immigrants came originally from the Sanyi and Siyi areas in Guangdong Province. Most wealthy merchants were from Sanyi and were well educated. They spoke a dialect which was distinct from that of the farmers and workers from Siyi, although all these dialects are Cantonese. The people from Sanyi considered their dialect as the standard Cantonese (Tsai 45). They highly valued their language and culture. They taught their children the Chinese language and traditions at home; some even shipped their children back to China for schooling (Tchen 81). Thus, the Sanyi people had contributed greatly to maintaining the Chinese language and scholarly tradition inside Chinatown. On the other hand, the majority of the residents in San Francisco's Chinatown came from Siyi. They "spoke a dialect almost totally incomprehensible to the city dwellers" from Sanyi (Tsai 45). What is more, there was another small group of immigrants, the Hakkas客家人. The Hakka people originally migrated from the north of China to Guangdong and Fujian Provinces. Different from Sanyi and Siyi people's Cantonese dialects, the Hakka dialect客家话 is "more akin to Mandarin", which is

spoken by Chinese northerners (Tsai 45). Although people seldom heard the Hakka dialect spoken in San Francisco Chinatown, speakers of this tongue did exist in San Francisco and other parts of California.

Based on their dialects and origins, Chinese immigrants formed various groups and organizations to connect and unite individuals. The most common form was “huiguan”. It was “a traditional and lawful association of fellow-provincials away from home, either visiting or on business” (Tsai 46). An influential Siyi leader “named Yu Laoji founded the first huiguan the Kong Chow Company(or Guangzhou Huiguan 广州会馆)” in San Francisco in 1851 (Ow 57). It accepted members from all origins except Sanyi people and Hakkas. Soon Sanyi immigrants opened their “Sam Yup Company (or Sanyi Huiguan三邑会馆) with branches in San Francisco and Stockton” (Ow 75). The huiguans in San Francisco’s Chinatown provided all kinds of services to aid and protect the newly arriving immigrants from the same areas. For example, when “an immigrant ship arrived from China”, different huiguans would send interpreters “to the wharf to welcome the arrivals” who came from the place they originated (Tsai 48). It is not difficult to imagine how comforting it was for those new immigrants to hear the words of greeting in their own dialects when they first arrived on this foreign soil.

Beyond that, these huiguans regularly provided “interpreters, rough housing, community centers, and assistance in finding work” to the new Chinese immigrants as they started their lives in this new world (Chen, *The Chinese* 27). Thus, when a Chinese immigrant arrived in San Francisco, the first thing he would do was to find people who spoke his dialect. This language bond between Chinese immigrants strengthened the solidarity of Chinese huiguans and the migrant community in general. It endowed them with confidence and support when Chinese-speaking immigrants faced severe competition in the job market and racial discrimination. Later, other kinds of huiguans and organizations based on clans and occupations began to emerge in the

San Francisco Chinatown. In 1903, Liang Qichao reported that in San Francisco's Chinatown there were "10 public Chinese organizations, 2 trade organizations, 9 benevolent organizations, 24 clan organizations, 9 combined clan (blood-ties) organizations, 25 secret societies, and 5 cultural societies" (Tsai 51). This record shows that Chinese immigrants had already formed various types of organizations to unite and empower themselves at the turn of the century.

However, there were constant conflicts among these huiguans, mostly between Sanyi merchants and Siyi laborers. The large differences in income and the exploitation of the laborers were often the causes. In the late nineteenth century, Siyi immigrants continuously boycotted businesses run by Sanyi people (Chen, *Being Chinese* 29). The turning point to the unity of the Chinese migrant community came when Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao arrived in San Francisco in 1903. These two were the leaders of the revolutionary spirit in the last years of Qing Dynasty in China. They hoped to restore the power of China by establishing a constitutional monarchy. It is interesting that Kang Youwei came from the Sanyi area in Guangdong Province, whereas his student Liang Qichao came from Siyi. They went to San Francisco to raise money and support for their revolutionary activities in China. In their opinion, "such narrow identities as Sanyi or Siyi" should be "replaced by a broader identity as Chinese in a world of nations" (Chen, *Being Chinese* 29). No matter where one came from or what dialect one spoke, in the end he was Chinese. Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao's idea of a common Chinese language immediately aroused the patriotic passion of Chinese immigrants and eased the confrontations between different groups and huiguans. Chinese immigrants actively participated in all kinds of activities and discussions about the future of China and the rights of Chinese immigrants as an ethnic group in North America.

The shared root of the Chinese language and culture broke down the boundaries between different huiguans. The result was the formal foundation of The Six Companies in 1882. Its official Chinese name was Zhonghua Huiguan (中华会馆) and the English name, Chinese



Consolidated Benevolent Association. Americans often called it the Chinese Six Companies because of its six founding huiguans: Guangzhou Huiguan, Sanyi Huiguan, Yanghe Huiguan, Renhe Huiguan, Ningyang Huiguan, and Hehe Huiguan (Tsai 47). Later, the six founding huiguans elected officers and formed the Congress of the Six Companies or the Zhonghua Gongsuo (中华公所). The Six Company and its Congress played an essential role in not only San Francisco Chinatown but all Chinatowns in North America. They “settled disputes between individuals and the companies, decided strategies for contesting or seeking relief from unconstitutional or burdensome laws, devised ways to curb the importation of prostitutes, and arranged for public dinners and other celebrations” (Loomis 225-26). In other words, the Six Companies functioned as the administrative government in Chinatowns. They administered all internal affairs inside Chinese migrant communities. Moreover, according to Lyman, they were “the most important voice of the Chinese immigrants speaking to American officials” (33). At that time, Chinese immigrants barely had any voice or rights in the American society. As Anthony W. Lee notes in *Picturing Chinatown: Art and Orientalism in San Francisco*, Chinese immigrants “generally had no right to citizenship, no claim to education, and no recourse to political or legal representation; they were subject to laws that they had little hope of contesting and no ability to change” (39). The only way for Chinese immigrants to communicate with the American government was through the Six Companies. For example, if a poor and non-English-speaking Chinese immigrant wanted to defend himself in court, usually the Six Companies would hire an attorney for him. Thus, without a mastery of the English language, most first-generation Chinese immigrants had to depend on the Six Companies in order to express their anger inspired by the discriminatory treatment they suffered at the hands of the American government and society.

The above scenario characterized San Francisco’s Chinatown when Arnold Genthe photographed the Chinese migrant community from 1895 to 1906. During his multiple trips,

Genthe also noticed the role of language in Chinese immigrants' lives. He loved the "scarlet bulletins and gilt signs inscribed in the picturesque Chinese characters" on street walls and "the sound of temple gongs, the clashing of cymbals and the shrill notes of an orchestra" in the air (Genthe, *As* 33). Genthe sought to preserve the beauty of Chinese writing and music through photography. In his photographs, we see Genthe's special emphasis on the Chinese language, for example Chinese store signs and Chinese theaters. For Genthe, these signs and theater gates functioned as an interface between Chinatown and the surrounding American society. These photographs also serve as evidence for studying the language situation in the San Francisco Chinatown and the efforts of Chinese immigrants to protect and maintain their language.

Genthe's photographs cover a great variety of signs written in Chinese, for example restaurants, drug stores, pawn shops, vegetable stores, gambling houses, temples, tea shops etc. These signs reflect that the services and facilities in Chinatown could meet Chinese immigrants' needs without relying on the English-speaking world outside of the boundaries of Chinatown. Maxine Hong Kingston points out that, on the reverse side, these photographs "record a culture held within bounds by both choice and necessity. The Chinese bought and sold among themselves almost exclusively, for they were forbidden to hawk their 'heathen' wares outside the confines of the city within a city" ("San" 43). Thus, the Chinese signs in Genthe's photographs become a feasible tool to attempt an analysis of the lives of Chinese immigrants and their language environment.

The first example will be taken from the depictions of food. In Figure 23, "Three Children in front of a Cellar Door, Chinatown, San Francisco", the observer sees two Chinese signs in front of a restaurant. The Chinese characters on the two signs tell customers that this restaurant serves a wide variety of food. The characters on the vertical narrow sign on the wall "麵食魚生肉粥常便" means "wheaten food, raw fish, meat porridge, simple meal". Even though this



Figure 23. Arnold Genthe. “Three Children in front of a Cellar Door, Chinatown, San Francisco”. Between 1896 and 1906. Library of Congress.

photograph is in black-and-white, from the different shades of grey color we can deduce that the writer used at least two colors to write the characters. The colors make the signage more attractive to the eyes. They also separates the words on it without using punctuation marks. In fact, punctuation marks did not become standard and popular until the late 1910s in China. At the time when Genthe took this photograph, Chinese immigrants in San Francisco were not inclined to use punctuation. This lack of punctuation differed from its frequent usage in the English language. The characters on the other wide sign “魚生常麵細吞雲晏酒” mean “raw fish, thin noodles, wonton, banquet”. The writer preserved the traditional Chinese writing order, which is from right to left and from top to bottom. Thus, the correct way to read this sign is “雲吞細麵酒

晏魚生常”. This right-to-left writing order is opposite to its English counterpart, which reads from-left-to-right. The two signs list almost every kind of food service that Chinese immigrants relied on for their daily enjoyment. In this restaurant one can either eat a simple meal or organize a grand banquet. The two signs also imply that there are at least two floors in this restaurant. Perhaps one floor is for simple meals in the cellar; the other is for banquets in the upper stories of the building. Thus, in San Francisco’s Chinatown, Chinese immigrants were able to satisfy their taste for Chinese food without needing to rely on a single English word.

In addition to restaurants, Chinese immigrants opened drug stores and clinics in the San Francisco’s Chinatown as well. Figure 24 is a photograph of two drug store signs. The characters on the dark sign “各省地道藥材” mean “authentic medicine from every province”. The



Figure 24. Arnold Genthe. “The Drug Store Sign, Chinatown, San Francisco”. Between 1896 and 1906. Library of Congress.

character “堂” on the white sign indicates that this place is a drug store and a clinic. The building behind the sign column is the drug store. These two signs indicate to the Chinese-speaking customers in Chinatown that they are able to acquire all kinds of medicine imported from China. At that time, many Chinese immigrants were used to traditional Chinese herbal medicine and treatment. The owners of these Chinese drug stores were usually doctors too. They not only sold medicine, but also examined the patients and wrote prescriptions. When a Chinese immigrant was sick or wished to buy tonic, it was not necessary for him to go to an English-speaking hospital outside Chinatown. Actually, according to John Kuo Wei Tchen, Chinese immigrants “were generally barred from access to San Francisco’s hospitals and were unfairly blamed for many of the plagues that affected the city. Racist policies eventually forced Chinese businessmen to build their own clinic within Tangrenbu (Chinatown) in 1900 ” (58). Therefore, most Chinese immigrants were forced to rely on their own Chinese drug stores and clinics in Chinatown.

In addition to store signs, Arnold Genthe also captured immigrants reading Chinese posters and newspapers on the walls of buildings on Chinatown streets. Genthe titled Figure 25 “Reading the Tong proclamation, Chinatown, San Francisco,” an incorrect designation. In fact, the papers on the walls are posters and newspapers reporting the news of Chinatown and China. In the photograph, three passersby are reading the news and announcements written in Chinese on the wall. When the old newspapers and notices are outdated, people will scrape them off and paste the new ones on top. The wooden box on the left end of the wall is for disposing of the waste paper.

Although Chinese immigrants did not have a voice in American society, they still upheld their language and speech within their own community. As Karl Lo observes in the article “Kim Shan Jit San Luk: The First Chinese Paper Published in America”, the *Golden Hills’ News* was the first Chinese-language newspaper in North America, which probably started publishing on April 22, 1854 in San Francisco (8). The first Chinese article in the *Golden Hills’ News* was



Figure 25. Arnold Genthe. “Reading the Tong Proclamation, Chinatown, San Francisco”. Between 1896 and 1906. Library of Congress.

written by an author named Li, who “suggested that this newspaper can provide some small help to Chinese through facilitating business, providing knowledge, conveying popular opinions, and communicating governmental issues” (Yang 4). This newspaper functioned as an open forum which offered various kinds of assistance and information to the Chinese-speaking community. The sections in *Golden Hills’ News* included “ship arrival or departure dates, prices of commodities, local news, and news related to U.S., China, and other parts of East Asia” (Yang 4). Chinese-speaking readers were able to obtain information and news about their community and the outside world. Later, more Chinese newspapers, such as *The Oriental* (1855-1856), *San Francisco China News* (1874-1875), and *Chung Sai Yat Po* (中西日報, meaning China West Daily [published from 1900 to 1951]), appeared in the San Francisco Chinatown. Even though

these Chinese immigrants were far from homeland, they still cared about what was happening there. They were very concerned about the revolution and the social transformation in China at the turn of the century. At the time that Genthe photographed San Francisco Chinatown, in China Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao were persuading the emperor to adapt a Western constitution, which was later rejected. Soon, Dr. Sun Yat-sen and his followers tried to overthrow the Qing Dynasty and establish a republic. All three of these revolutionists had traveled to the San Francisco Chinatown to look for supporters. The Chinese-language newspapers and posters on the street walls became Chinatown residents' major source of news about China.

Along with the Chinese press, Chinese immigrants also brought Chinese-language performance art to the San Francisco Chinatown. Genthe's photographs of Chinese theaters provide ample evidence. For example, Figure 26 "New Year's Day Before the Theatre, Chinatown, San Francisco" is a photograph depicting the theatergoers in front of a Chinese theatre in Chinatown. They are probably waiting for the start of the next show. Two Chinese immigrants are looking up at the front door, which often displays the performance schedule and ticket information. According to Tchen's note, this is Danguì ( or "Red Cassia" 丹桂) Theatre on Washington Street (91). As one of the most popular Chinese theaters in the San Francisco Chinatown, it could seat "several hundred people" (Tchen 91). Chinese immigrants did not lose their passion for this traditional language performance art in America. From poor migrant workers to wealthy merchants, they all went to theaters to enjoy themselves. The steady demand of Chinatown residents for new theatrical performances attracted traveling troupes from China which performed regularly in these theaters (Tsai 37). The performances and operas were of various kinds, and performances were both in Cantonese and Mandarin; "occasionally one of the theaters offer[ed] films of Chinese opera, though the level of sophistication necessary for full appreciation of this art form [was] not easily met and such showings [were] frequently unprofitable" (Salter 41). Each group of Chinese immigrants had their favorite performances.



Figure 26. Arnold Genthe. "New Year's Day Before the Theatre, Chinatown, San Francisco". Between 1896 and 1906. Library of Congress.

In addition to Chinese-speaking audiences, American tourists were also interested in Chinese theaters. In the above photograph taken by Genthe, we see an English sign on the beam of the front gate. It introduces the latest spectacle to English speakers. Among the audience waiting outside the theater, there are two white Americans in the photograph, one in the foreground, the other in the background. No doubt, Arnold Genthe was another outsider who was curious about Chinese theaters. In his memoir *As I Remember*, Genthe recounted his fascination with Chinese theater: "It made no difference that I could not understand the language; the



significance and the artistry of pantomime were enough to arouse the enthusiasm of the most blasé spectator” (38). This was another approach for Genthe to study the residents and their culture in Chinatown.

It is worth noting that in this photograph of Chinese theater we now see English signs and American tourists. This difference suggests that while Chinese was still the major language in Chinatown, English was used to attract outside tourists. Food, medical care, publishing, and theaters were essential to Chinese immigrants’ daily life. The use of the Chinese language made these resources more accessible to the inhabitants of Chinatown. As for American tourists, they visited Chinatown was for entertainment. The English sign outside Chinese theaters met these tourists’ needs. From the English signs, these curiously tourists could quickly locate the Chinese shows that interested them.

However, in some of his photographs of the San Francisco Chinatown, Genthe intentionally tried to avoid and even erase English signs and other American features. Evidently, he wished to present “the pulse of China” in Chinatown (Genthe, *As* 32). The English signs and American tourists interfered with his quest for “the essence” of Chineseness. Although an opponent of retouching, more than once Genthe etched out or cropped off the American features in his photographs (Genthe, “Rebellion” 99). He explains that during the development of the negatives, “it will often be necessary to intensify weak parts or reduce too dense portions of the negative, a tedious, but rather necessary manipulation” (Genthe, “Rebellion” 99). In Genthe’s opinion, retouching after the process of development is dishonest and “something a photographer with any artistic conscience will not do” (“Rebellion” 99); but modification in the development process is apparently acceptable. Perhaps Genthe considered the erasure of American elements in his photographs of Chinatown a “necessary manipulation” to “intensify” the “weak parts” and “reduce” the “too dense portions”. The result was Genthe’s orientalist depiction of Chinatown

that coincided with the West's stereotypical perception of the locale: Chinatown was only a smaller version of China, not a part of America.

In spite of these revisions and manipulations, Genthe's photographs attest that the white American culture and English language were forever lingering in the background of Chinatown and in the lives of Chinese immigrants. The English signs and American tourists were solid evidence. They reflected the contact between the Chinese-speaking community and the surrounding English-speaking society. Photographer Dorothea Lange, Arnold Genthe's student, once described "the convergence of different populations and interests on a street corner of Chinatown" as a "junction of many different things" (Lee, *Picturing* 8). Language was absolutely one of the "many different things" to which Lange referred. The language milieu for Chinatown residents was never homogeneous or pure Chinese; English and Chinese coexisted from the very beginning. American laws ultimately prevailed and tourists were always at the door. Thus, even for the first-generation Chinese immigrants living in the relative security of Chinatown, the English language was still an issue that they could not avoid. This is why there were English signs for Americans since the birth of Chinatown. Its birth was a trading wharf between Chinese and American merchants. Later, American tourists brought income that helped Chinese immigrants not only survive but sometimes thrive.

After the 1906 earthquake, San Francisco's Chinatown was rebuilt. The Chinese Six Companies took this opportunity to "promote tourism" actively, since other industries, such as mining, railroad construction, and manufacture, had declined (Teng 74). The streets became cleaner, more accessible and better organized. Stores and restaurants displayed more English signs. Chinese immigrants were encouraged to "dress like whites and learn English" (Kington, *San* 38). Americanization was quickly taking hold. However, in Arnold Genthe's eyes, these changes signaled the death of Old Chinatown. After the earthquake, Genthe made several additional trips to San Francisco's Chinatown. When he saw Chinese immigrants in American

clothes and without queues in the freshly painted streets, he lamented that “the charm, the color, the atmosphere of old Chinatown [were] gone” (Genthe, “Time” 302). But Genthe noticed “one thing of beauty still survived—the Chinese ideographs seen on shop-signs or ... on the bulletin-board of a Chinese newspaper” (“Time” 302). This is the beauty of Chinese language, which was deeply rooted in the Chinese immigrants and community. As Genthe’s friend Will Irwin wrote, a member of older generation of Chinese immigrants “passed on to the babies his own wonder tales of flowered princesses and golden dragons, he taught them to patter in sing-song Cantonese” (27). The Chinese language passed the immigrants’ tales and children’s songs onto the future generations.

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The surge of contemporary Chinese immigrants in North America began in the late 1960s. The major cause was the passage of an amendment to the Immigration and Nationality Act, or the Hart-Cellar Act in America. According to Min Zhou’s study in “Chinese: Divergent Destinies in Immigrant New York”, the Hart-Cellar Act “abolished the national quota system that restricted immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, lifted the ban on immigration from Asia, and established the seven preference categories with an equal per-country limit of 20,000 in annual admissions” (145). The population of immigrants from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China has grown rapidly over the past fifty years. According to the U.S. immigration statistics, from 1971 to 1996, “approximately 1.1 million Chinese immigrants were legally admitted to the United States as permanent residents” (Zhou, “Chinese” 145-46). In 2001, the number of Chinese immigrants in the United States, including illegal immigrants, reached “no fewer than 2 million” (Zhu 8). California is still contemporary Chinese immigrants’ favorite destination. In 1990, California was “home to 43 percent of the U.S. Chinese population” (Zhou, “Chinese” 146). The second largest population of Chinese immigrants is in New York City, “accounting for

almost 20 percent of all Chinese immigrants legally admitted to the United States” (Zhou, “Chinese” 146). In this part of my dissertation, I will focus on the contemporary first-generation Chinese immigrants in New York City.

In contrast to the early Chinese immigrants who migrated mainly from Guangdong Province, the contemporary Chinese immigrants in New York are of diverse origins. According to Zhou’s statistics, in 1990, 47.5 percent were from mainland China, 7.9 percent from Taiwan, 11.4 percent from Hong Kong, and 11.3 percent from other places (“Chinese” 151). Like earlier immigrants, contemporary Chinese also tend to settle in Chinatowns in New York, at the rate of 19.8 percent (“Chinese” 151). They do so for the same reason the earlier immigrants did — language. In New York, the first wave of Chinese immigrants settled in the Old Chinatown in lower Manhattan where the dominant language is Cantonese. In contrast, contemporary immigrants from diverse places of origin tend to speak Mandarin. They are inclined to live in the Chinese settlements outside the Old Chinatown, the largest of which is Flushing in Queens. The history of the way in which Flushing was settled and its social environment provide good examples to study the language situation of contemporary first-generation Chinese immigrants. The analysis of Ha Jin’s short story collection *A Good Fall* serves to enrich and deepen the study.

The earliest wave of Chinese immigrants in Flushing came from Taiwan in the 1970s. They spoke Mandarin and did not identify with the Cantonese culture in Manhattan’s Chinatown. They bought houses in Flushing, Queens and established a new settlement, called “Little Taipei”. Later, immigrants from mainland China and Hong Kong followed in their footsteps. Since Taiwanese immigrants are no longer the majority, Flushing is often referred to as New York City’s second Chinatown. As I have already mentioned, these contemporary Chinese immigrants came from different places. Thus, besides their own dialects, they have to use Mandarin, the official Chinese language, to communicate. Language is a major factor behind the immigrants’ decision to live in Flushing rather than the Cantonese-speaking Old Chinatown in Manhattan.

The immigrants in Flushing come from more diversified backgrounds than those in Manhattan's Chinatown, where the low-income Chinese migrant workers are the majority. The residents in Flushing include business investors, teachers, students, retired parents coming to reunite with their children, etc. In addition to Chinese immigrants, there are also immigrants from other parts of Asia, such as Korea, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, to name a few (Zhou, "Chinese" 160). In the year 2000, the Asian ethnic population made up 56 percent of the overall Flushing population, and the "Latino comprised 21 percent" (Zhou and Kim 136). In contrast, in the same year the Chinese population in Manhattan's Old Chinatown was over 70 percent (Zhou and Kim 130). Therefore, multi-ethnic Flushing is much less segregated than the Old Chinatown in Manhattan.

The less segregated environment reinforces the transitory nature of Flushing. As Zhou Min and John R. Logan remark, "segregation is only temporary, and will diminish as group members, having improved their labor market position and absorbed mainstream values, choose residences in new areas" (388). Many contemporary immigrants arrived in Flushing with a better education, capital, skills, and English ability than earlier immigrants. They are more likely to adapt to an American environment outside of Flushing. For them, Flushing is only a temporary home or a transitory stop to someplace else. According to Zhou Min's research, "since the mid-1990s, there is evidence of secondary migration among the more affluent Chinese immigrants from Flushing to bedroom communities in Long Island, New Jersey, and Connecticut" ("Chinese" 161). They see greater opportunities and better living environments outside Flushing, and their abilities enhance their mobility.

For the Chinese immigrants who stay in Flushing, they also try to make a better life inside the community. As mentioned above, their limited English-language ability is one of the main reasons why they stay in Flushing. English is not the dominant language in Flushing. "As of 1990, 43 percent of the residents are born abroad, ... 46 percent of the residents spoke a

language other than English at home, and 11 percent reported that they speak English poorly” (Zhou and Kim 136). Since Chinese immigrants are the largest ethnic group in Flushing, they are able to survive easily without having to master the English language. Having inherited the functions of old Chinatowns, the streets in Flushing are full of Chinese-language facilities and services: restaurants, supermarkets, barbershops, pharmacies, travel agencies, real estate agencies, and so forth. Even the ATM machines display Chinese characters in Flushing. If the Chinese-speaking residents still cannot satisfy their needs in the community, subway line 7 easily takes them to Manhattan. Moreover, the signs and even advertisements on line 7 are written in Chinese. In other words, the language environment in Flushing is not much different from a small town in China. For this reason it is not difficult for Chinese immigrants, even low-skilled working-class immigrants, to survive in Flushing. However, for those who want to get ahead and move up the economic scale, the English language is the first challenge they must face.

As Chalsa M. Loo reveals in her study of contemporary Chinatown inhabitants, including those in Flushing, they are “less able to speak English, were older when they immigrated to the United States, made less in wages” (126). The Chinese language environment in Flushing provides this disadvantaged group a buffer against the competitive world outside. The convenient Chinese-language facilities and services in Flushing reduce the urgency for them to learn English. Also, they are able to find jobs easily offered by the same ethnic employers. Many take these as excuses for not learning English. But on the other hand, this lack of English ability confines their choice of occupation and social circle to Flushing. The result often contradicts to the material wealth and freedom they once expected before their migration (Martin 2). What is more, after working long hours at the low-wage jobs, these working-class immigrants often do not have the time or the energy to learn English. They find themselves trapped in their “dead-end jobs under poor working conditions and seeing little hope of ever making it in America” (Zhou,

“Chinese” 167). Their mobility to move out of Flushing is heavily restrained. Therefore, for Chinese immigrants who do not speak English, living in Flushing is both a blessing and a curse.

Of course, these first-generation Chinese immigrants in Flushing still desire a better life, even if it means they have to step out of the Chinese-language comfort zone and learn English. According to Zhou and Logan’s research, “only English language ability affects place of residence” for Chinese immigrants, and “proficient English adds approximately 12% of the likelihood of residence outside the city” (398). No doubt, Chinese immigrants understand the importance and necessity of the English language. To them, it means a better job and life. Chalsa M. Loo has interviewed a large number of Chinese immigrants living in Chinatowns. She notes that “nearly all employed Chinatown residents who had difficulty with the English language believed that English-speaking ability would increase their socioeconomic mobility; 95% said they would feel qualified for a better job if they could speak English well” (126). This is not hard to understand. Fluent English enables Chinese immigrants to participate in the communities outside Flushing and obtain more opportunities in the job market. How to improve English becomes the biggest challenge for the first-generation Chinese immigrants in Flushing. Ha Jin’s story collection, *A Good Fall*, foregrounds this pervasive anxiety about mastering the English language among the Chinese residents in Flushing.

The story “A Pension Plan” nicely illustrates a working-class first-generation Chinese immigrant’s determination to change her job and improve her life through learning English. Jufen, the 48-year-old heroine, is a caretaker hired through a Chinese employment agency in Flushing. Her job is to take care of the 69-year-old Mr. Sheng who is suffering from senile dementia. Mr. Sheng falls in love with Jufen and is constantly harassing her. Later, Mr. Sheng’s daughter Minna asks Jufen to marry Mr. Sheng just in name, in order to comfort him. Unable to bear the humiliation and exploitation, Jufen chooses to quit this job and sets out to learn English. In doing so, she hopes she will be able to find a stable job with a pension plan outside Flushing.

Jufen's story mirrors many working-class Chinese immigrants' dilemma. Ha Jin once remarked in an interview that "so many people have been exploited by Chinese agencies because they can't speak English. There are a lot of reports, but I've never seen a story. That's why I was determined to write about these people" (Bolonik 76). The Chinese employment agencies in Flushing do assist working-class Chinese immigrants to find jobs inside the community. It is a form of cooperative strategy based on ethnicity for the residents and local economy. However, due to their insufficient education, limited English, and few marketable skills, working-class Chinese immigrants often become the target of labor exploitation. Although they wish to be free from their reliance and dependency on Chinese employment agencies and find a decent and stable job outside Flushing, the English language is always their biggest challenge.

Moreover, these first-generation immigrants suffer many other kinds of loss in their lives when they move out of Chinese-speaking Flushing. For example, in the story "A Pension Plan", Jufen once moved from Elmhurst to Corona. In doing so, she lost all her deposit of seven hundred dollars because she couldn't understand the English contract that she signed four years ago (Ha, *A Good* 169). Zhou and Logan point out that "residential mobility is an expression of socioeconomic mobility" (404). Jufen's lack of residential and socioeconomic mobility is caused by her limited English competency. Thus, it is an absolute necessity for working-class Chinese immigrants to learn English if they want to improve their current situation.

In "A Pension Plan", Jufen is also faced with the difficulty of learning a new language, especially at such an old age. She asks herself: "At my age, how can I learn another language from scratch? I couldn't even remember the order of the alphabet. If only I were thirty years younger" (Ha, *A Good* 167). But if she never started trying, she would be stuck in Flushing, or, in her own words, would "starve and die" (Ha, *A Good* 173). In order to walk out of Flushing and enjoy the freedom bestowed by the English language, Jufen plucks up her courage and embraces the challenge. In another interview, Ha Jin describes this challenge that many first-



generation Chinese immigrants face as follows: “The hardest things are really to face your own life and be able to take that road. That's the hardest part because it's a lonely road very often. Freedom also means uncertainty and a lot of people who grew up in a different kind of a social environment very often can be frightened, intimidated by freedom” (“Chinese”). Jufen in this story feels intimidated by the difficulty of learning English at her age, yet she does not back down. She says to herself, “To be honest, I’m not sure if I’ll be able to learn enough English to live a different life, but I must try” (Ha, *A Good* 174). It is a smart move on Jufen's part when she begins to learn English by watching soap operas on television. Also she learns from Father Lorenzo that the church in Flushing offers free English classes, which she will attend. These efforts show her eagerness to change her current miserable situation and fight for a brighter future. No doubt, Ha Jin wrote this story to celebrate a first-generation Chinese immigrant’s courage and resilience in her battle to learn English.

According to Chalsa M. Loo’s study, almost none of the Chinese immigrants “who entered this country at age 50 and over spoke English” in the 1980s (129). From the 1990s until today, more elderly Chinese immigrants arrive with some English ability. By contrast, even in the 1980s, “nearly all Chinese immigrants who entered the United States at age 11-17 spoke English” (Loo 129). However, this does not mean that young immigrants will not encounter any language problems in their migrant lives. Speaking is only a basic skill they need to survive. Although most of these young immigrants go to school, many still need to improve their fluency in written and spoken English. As Morrison G. Wong points out, “their lack of facility with the English language, whether written and/or oral communication skills, may place an insurmountable barrier to their future socioeconomic and career placement” (123). In Ha Jin’s *A Good Fall*, there are a few stories that describe the language anxiety of young Chinese immigrants.

In the story “The House behind a Weeping Cherry”, the main character Wanping lands in a toilsome job due to his low English proficiency. His parents has urged him to go to college and seek better opportunities. Yet as a foreign student, Wanping has to pass the TOEFL, the English proficiency test, in order to be considered a candidate for college matriculation in America. Unfortunately, he can not pass the English test and his family needs money to send his brother to school (Ha, *A Good* 198). Without an adequate mastery of English and other skills, he finds a job at a garment factory as a presser, which is a very common occupation for non-English speaking Chinese immigrants.

Some young Chinese immigrants have better opportunities to improve their English. This is the case with the high school student Sami in Ha Jin’s story “Choices”. Sami’s mother hires a private SAT tutor to help her pass the English test. Although she does not have much of a problem with speaking, she has a difficult time learning to read and write. She works so hard that she “even tried memorizing all the words listed at the back of her English textbook” (Ha, *A Good* 56-57). Her goal is to enter an Ivy League college, which requires a mastery of English reading and writing skills. Yet these are usually the most challenging parts in learning English.

The difficulties of acquiring reading and writing skills demonstrate the validity of Calvin Veltman’s study on language acquisition. According to Veltman, biliterate skills often lag behind bilingual skills, and in normal language acquisition, facility in oral comprehension exceeds speaking ability, which in turn exceeds reading and writing skills (160). In other words, it is easier for us to learn speaking a new language than it is to reading and write in it. This rule also pertains to the English acquisition of Chinese immigrants. Chalsa M. Loo’s study shows that “among the Chinese monolingual and Chinese-dominant speaking residents, twice as many have English receptive and speaking skills as have English writing and reading skills” (128). Therefore, the struggle to read and write English is prevalent among first-generation Chinese immigrants.

In the story “Choices”, Sami’s tutor notices her weakness in reading and writing. He “focus[es] on enlarging her vocabulary and teaching her how to write clearly and expressively” (Ha, *A Good* 51). In addition, he “assign[s] her a list of books to read, mainly novels and plays” so that she can learn from these excellent writing examples (Ha, *A Good* 51). After a long time of practice, her writing skill is still not satisfying: “at times her sentences could be convoluted, built of abstract words and clichés” (Ha, *A Good* 67). These details reflect the difficulties a young Chinese immigrant has in acquiring and improving his or her language skills, even with the help of a tutor. As a Chinese migrant writer writing in English, Ha Jin definitely expresses his sympathy for, and understanding of, the learning process.

This language anxiety troubles not only new but also long-term Chinese immigrants, even some professionals. The main character Rusheng Tang in the story “An English Professor” is a perfect example. Rusheng is an associate professor of English. After submitting the application materials for his tenure evaluation, he notices a mistyped phrase “respectly yours” in one of the documents. He is afraid that this small mistake will ruin his future career. He becomes so paranoid over his mistake that he is often absentminded in class and even begins to look for other jobs after class. Although Rusheng finally receives tenure at the end of the story, the good news leaves him hysterical.

Throughout the story, Rusheng worries obsessively over this typo. He thinks to himself:

People wouldn’t treat it as a mere typo or slip. It was a glaring solecism that indicated his incompetence in English. If he were in science or sociology or even comparative literature, the consequences of the mistake would have been less dire. But for an English professor, this was unforgivable, regardless of his sophisticated use of various methodologies to analyze a literary text. People would shake their heads and say that an English professor must at least be able to write decent English. (Ha, *A Good* 140)

In his mind, this typo will lead his colleagues to question his qualifications as an English professorship, not to mention for tenure. Maybe the college will fire him. In addition to his

colleagues and his position, he also worries about his reputation in the Chinese community in Flushing. Since he writes “a column for the Chinese-language *Global Weekly* on English grammar and usage. If denied tenure, he would become a joke ... to the Chinese community that knew him as an expert. His reputation would crumble” (Ha, *A Good* 144). From another aspect, his obsessive anxiety reflects the difficulty that Chinese immigrants perceive to achieve this level of English competency. In the eyes of many Chinese immigrants, “English is a special asset in Chinatown, because this is not something everybody in the community has” (Zhou, *Chinatown* 145). Rusheng’s occupation as an English professor has won the respect and admiration of other Chinese immigrants. He is a successful example for Chinese immigrants who wish to learn English. Following this logic, Rusheng’s failure to win tenure will seem a setback to the Chinese community.

The “happy ending” of this story proves that Rusheng is qualified to become a tenured professor of English. The typo does not influence the result at all. In fact, there are several details in the story that suggest Rusheng’s mastery of the English language. For example, he has “degrees from both Beijing University and Harvard” (Ha, *A Good* 145); his manuscript was recently “accepted by the SUNY Press” (Ha, *A Good* 137); he has already published a book and his second book is on the way (Ha, *A Good* 138). All this is solid evidence of his English proficiency. Why then is Rusheng still not confident of himself and his ability to write English? Even when he receives the chairman’s letter of congratulations, why does Rusheng still not believe it is true (Ha, *A Good* 152)?

Perhaps, the source of this self-doubt lies in his foreign origin. He can not get rid of the perception of himself as an alien in this country. Even though his previous achievements clearly reveal his English ability to speak and write English and the willingness to accommodate his “language behavior to that of the American environment” (Loo 127), his hyphenated identity upends his confidence. The English language, a second language to him, is an indicator of

Rusheng's identity crisis. Rusheng does not feel at home when using the English language, because in his mind, English is not his mother tongue. Chalsa Loo's study corroborates Rusheng's story when the author notes that "psychological emotional conflicts resulting from the second language acquisition compound the problem" (127). At worst, this problem leads to the loss in self-esteem and identity. In other words, the inability to use English correctly undermines the Rusheng's overall ability and identity in his adopted country. In Holly E. Martin's words, "at any moment he or she could be tripped up by a simple mistake – one that would not be made by a native speaker – and a minor infraction of language or decorum could lead to disaster" (7). This fear further enhances the Chinese immigrants' sense of identity and status.

In the story "An English Professor", Rusheng's anxiety over tenure leads him to hunt for other jobs that do not require a high level of English language competency. Yet he soon discovers that his current English skills already put him in a higher economic class than other Chinese immigrants. He enjoys the mobility and freedom that other non-English-speaking Chinese immigrants envy. If he gives up his teaching position, he will regress to the status of other immigrants, like Jufen in the story "A Pension Plan". Clearly, Rusheng's story reveals the language difficulties and anxiety besetting even seasoned Chinese immigrants who have already mastered the English language. Even though they strive to integrate themselves into American society, the lack of confidence when using the language and doubts over their overall abilities inform every aspect of Chinese immigrants' lives. Will there be a change in the second generation? In the next part of this chapter, I will discuss how language affects the offspring of Chinese immigrants.

### 3.2 The Language Confusion of Second-generation Chinese Immigrants from the perspectives of Benjamin Chinn and Frank Chin

In the previous part of this chapter, I discussed the language anxieties of first-generation Chinese immigrants in North America. As a continuation, the second-generation faces new problems. Compared with the early arrival of first-generation Chinese immigrants in North America in the early nineteenth century, the massive presence of the second generation came very late. One of the major reasons for this was the aforementioned Chinese exclusion laws that forbade Chinese male laborers to bring their wives to North America or marry American citizens. Thus, it was not until the “1920s and 1930s, a sizable second-generation Chinese population began to emerge” (Wong, “Chinese” 118). In 1943, the population of “native-born American citizens” surpassed the first generation and reached 52 percent of the total Chinese population in the U.S. (Tsai 147). Starting from the 1940s, the language issue of second-generation Chinese immigrants began to attract the attention of the Chinese communities in North America, especially the attention of Chinese migrant photographers and writers. Since the second generation immigrants in each period have their distinct historical context and issues of language, it is difficult for me to examine all of them in this part of my dissertation. Thus, in this part, I will only incorporate Benjamin Chinn’s photographs of the Chinese schools in San Francisco and Frank Chin’s two plays *The Chickencoop Chinaman* and *The Year of the Dragon* to discuss second-generation Chinese immigrants’ confusion and endeavor to establish their own language in their time, i.e. the 1940s to 1950s and the 1960s to 1970s. Before I delve into the discussion of the language situation of the second generation from the 1940s to 1970s, I will briefly introduce the current situation.

From the late twentieth century to now, it is prevalent among second-generation Chinese immigrants in North America to understand Chinese but prefer to speak English most of the time. Due to the first-generation Chinese immigrants’ lack of English proficiency, the Chinese language is usually used between family members. Growing up in a Chinese-language environment at home, the second generation usually do not have problems understanding

Chinese. Many can speak fluently at home when they are young. According to the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study, in 1992, 92.2% of Chinese immigrant children speak Chinese at home, and 29.4% can speak very well (United States, *Comprehensive* 38). But after entering the English-speaking public schools, their Chinese-language ability dwindles and English becomes their major language. The same study notes that 78.4% of Chinese immigrant children prefer to speak English not Chinese (United States, *Comprehensive* 39). The linguistic life expectancy of the Chinese language among Chinese immigrants is 2 generations (United States, *Comprehensive* 45). When it reaches 2.5 or later generations, less than 5% of Chinese immigrants are able to speak Chinese very well (United States, *Comprehensive* 42). That is to say, even when older generations speak to them in Chinese at home, they will respond in English.

On the one hand, the parents in Chinese migrant families want their children to master English in order to enter mainstream society. On the other hand, for fear of losing their ethnic culture and language, the parents exert significant efforts to preserve the Chinese language among their children. In general, Chinese migrant parents value the inheritance of their native tongue very much. In Zhang Donghui and Diana T. Slaughter-Defoe's study "Language Attitudes and Heritage Language Maintenance among Chinese Immigrant Families in the USA", the two authors list Chinese migrant parents' attitudes toward the Chinese language inheritance of their children:

Some parents regard their home language as an important resource that their children could take advantage of in their academic advancement and future career. Other parents see the home language as closely related to their ethnic identity, an important heritage that connects the second-generation children to their home country and culture. Still other parents see the home language as a necessary family link that reinforces family ties and contributes to family cohesion. (83)

To sum up, Chinese migrant parents consider the Chinese language a link to their ethnic heritage and a major source of their ethnic identity. In order to maintain the Chinese language among the second generation, in addition to teaching their children themselves at home, many Chinese

immigrant parents choose to send children to Chinese schools to learn the language more systematically at a very young age.

In fact, Chinese schools have a long history in America. The first Chinese school for teaching the Chinese language to American-born Chinese, the “Chinese Public School”, was founded by the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association in 1908 “near the entrance of New York’s Chinatown” (Tsai 124-25). In 1909, the San Francisco Chinese Public School was started and “for several years the president of the Six Companies also served as president of the school” (Tsai 125). Soon, many Chinese language schools appeared in other major cities in America, and almost all of them were founded “in the early twentieth century” (Tsai 125). The most important subject that the students learned at these schools was the Chinese language. In addition, they studied “Chinese calligraphy, history, literature, and classics”, etc. (Nee xxv). Students attended the Chinese schools after finishing their classes at the American public schools, usually “from 4:00 to 7:00 P.M. Mondays through Fridays and from 9:00 to 12:00 A.M. on Saturdays” (Tsai 125). These schools were very popular in the 1970s in the Chinese community in San Francisco. According to Victor Nee’s record, “about thirty-one percent of Chinatown elementary students attend[ed] these schools” (xxv). However, this number only reflects Chinese immigrant parents’ determination to have their children learn Chinese and become familiar with their ethnic inheritance. In contrast, their children hold a drastically different attitude toward attending Chinese schools.

Second-generation children often tend to identify with the English-speaking society rather than their Chinese-speaking community. Since the 1920s when Chinese American children were allowed to attend public schools until now (Kuo 200), the second generation they are often surrounded by their English-speaking peers and learning environment. In comparison, they have relatively less exposure to a Chinese language environment outside the home. As a result, they are usually more competent in English than in Chinese. Moreover, the dominant American



culture further encourages them to see themselves as English-speaking Americans rather than as Chinese. As Shiow-Huey Luo and Richard L. Wiseman remark, “when the dominant language substitutes for an ethnic language as the means of communication, the erosion of that ethnic language increases” (309). Therefore, these second-generation children sometimes rebel against their parents’ decision to send them to Chinese schools. They tend to consider this as an unnecessary burden added to that of their public school education. For example, they have to do extra homework from the Chinese schools and even attend classes on weekends, while these courses do not help with their public school curriculum (Zhang, “Language” 91). So these children often lack the motivation to study Chinese at the Chinese schools. In their daily lives, they only speak Chinese with their parents or with people who do not understand English or in their Chinese-language classes. Once they finish the classes, even during their breaks at the Chinese schools, they immediately switch to English (Chen, *Chinatown* 156).

The main reason why the second-generation children are resistant to attending Chinese schools is that they fail to see the significance of learning Chinese in an English-dominated society. Unlike the first-generation immigrants, the second generation tend to have weaker attachment to Chinese culture and language. Born and raised in America, they are more concerned about how to fit in and behave like their American peers. Thus, they do not feel the urgency or the need to learn the “exotic” language of their parents. They go to Chinese schools only because their parents tell them to. When the second-generation grow older and become more independent, most of them would choose to drop out of the Chinese schools and focus on the study in American public schools (Nee xxv). However, this does not mean that they will never think of picking up their ethnic language again in the future. As Jin Sook Lee observes, “It usually requires psychological maturation on the part of the individual to realise the true value and benefit of knowing one’s HL(Heritage Language) and culture, which often comes at a later age” (130). In other words, when these second-generation Chinese Americans become adults,

perhaps they might realize the significance of the Chinese language and its relationship to their ethnic identity. By that time, they want to learn Chinese again, but they may have already missed the ideal moment for learning the language.

After a brief and general survey of the language situation of second generation Chinese immigrants since the 1920s, now I will focus on the period from the 1940s to the 1950s. Chinese migrant photographer Benjamin Chinn noticed the language hybridity of the second-generation Chinese American children in the Chinese community of San Francisco's Chinatown in the 1940s and 50s. Dennis Reed points out that "issues of in-betweenness" are always evident in Chinn's photographs from 1946 to 1950 (15). According to Reed, "mid-century Chinatown was a battlefield of opposing cultural forces, made visible through such things as dress (traditional Chinese vs. standard American attire), advertising (signs in Chinese and English), and observance of cultural customs (Chinese and American). It was a conflicted and complicated world" (15). In Benjamin Chinn's archive recording the "issues of in-betweenness" in the San Francisco Chinatown, there are several photographs that capture Chinese American children learning Chinese at the Chinese language schools. These photographs realistically reflect second-generation Chinese Americans' uneasy cultural status, positioned as they are between their parents' language and that of Chinatown on one hand and standard English on the other.

As stated above, Chinese language schools had been very popular in Chinese communities from the early twentieth century until the present. Many second-generation Chinese Americans attended these schools when they were young. Having grown up, they still harbor memories of studying Chinese at a Chinese school in late afternoons. In fact, Benjamin Chinn was a student at the Chinese school in San Francisco's Chinatown. In the 1920s and 30s, he regularly attended Chinese school "for three hours ... every day, including Saturday" (Lord 1). Yet unlike some second-generation children who lost their parents' language after they dropped out of the Chinese schools, Chinn still managed the language even years later, when he travelled in China

(Lord 1). Beyond that, when he grew up in the 1940s and 50s, the experience at the Chinese school inspired him to look back at his community. Therefore, in Chinn's photographs of Chinese school students and teachers, we can detect a note of nostalgia for his own school days and his attempt to contemplate the Chinese language acquisition of second-generation Chinese Americans in the 1940s and 50s.

In Figure 27, "Chinese Lessons", there are two Chinese migrant boys sitting at their desk in a Chinese school classroom. The boy at the center of the photograph is carefully copying Chinese characters in his practice book with a traditional brush pen and ink. The book under his left hand is a copybook for practicing Chinese calligraphy (in Chinese called 字帖). In addition

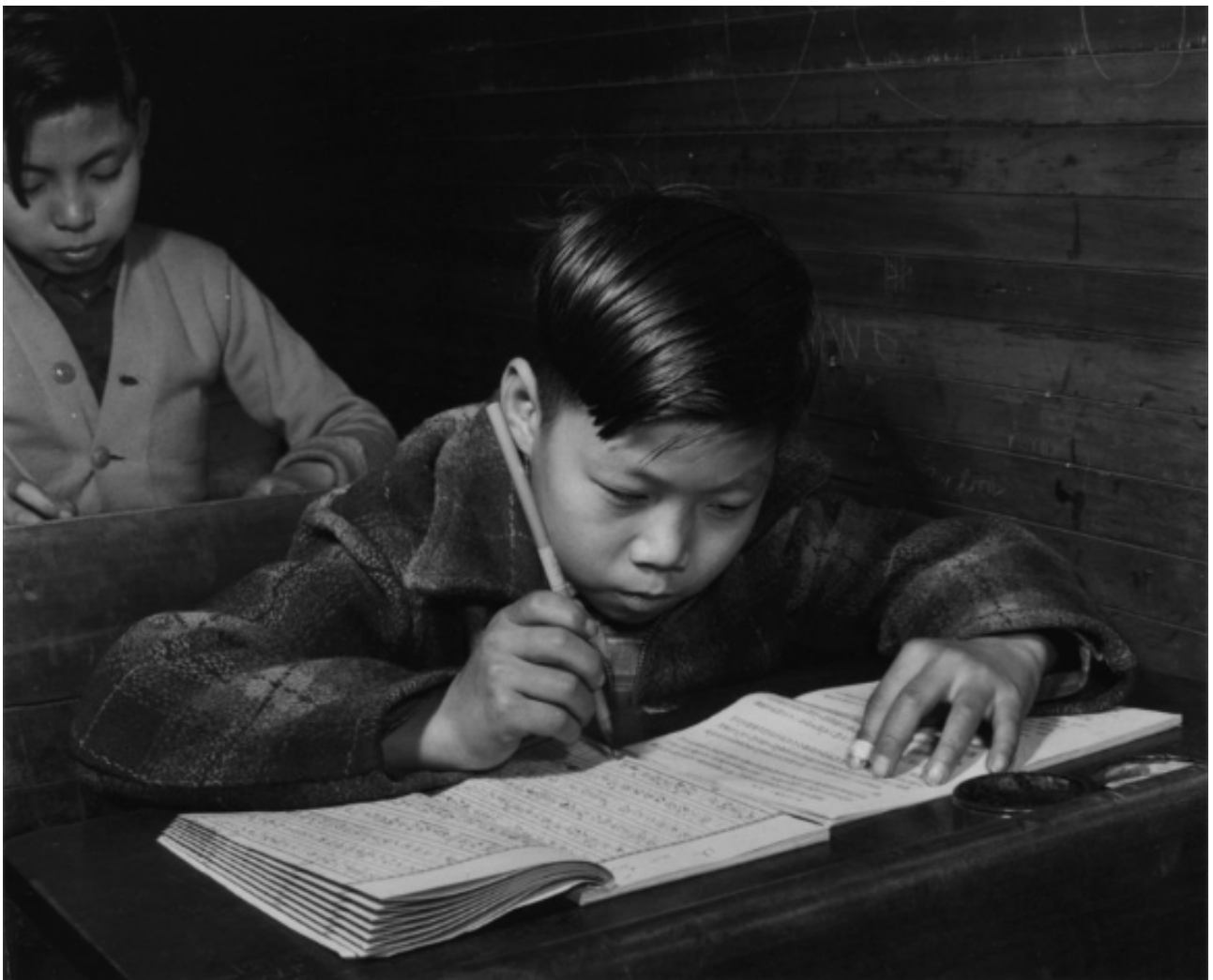


Figure 27. Benjamin Chinn. "Chinese Lessons". Between 1947 and 1950.  
[www.benjaminchinn.com/chinatown.html](http://www.benjaminchinn.com/chinatown.html).

to the characters on the copybook, he is also following the vertical writing order of the traditional Chinese language. The way he holds the brush pen is the orthodox gesture for writing Chinese calligraphy, while the boy behind him writes with a pen in the Western style. Clearly, the boy in the foreground is learning Chinese characters and calligraphy in the Chinese school. Perhaps he is able to communicate with his parents in oral Chinese, but he still needs more writing practice.

This photograph nicely suggests the aforementioned “in-betweenness” of second-generation Chinese Americans. The boys’ chic haircut, tweedy coat, and sweater are distinct signs of American cultural influence. Yet the coexistence of Chinese calligraphy and the American outfit appears natural and harmonious for these two second-generation boys. This kind of coexistence reflects the inherent duality of second-generation children. Both Chinese and American culture are infused into their personal growth.

In the next photograph “Hip Wo Class 1947” (Figure 28), we see five older Chinese American boys studying in the classroom of the Hip Wo Chinese School in the San Francisco Chinatown. Their textbook looks much thicker than the calligraphy copybook in the previous photograph. Perhaps this is a Chinese literature class for Chinese American youths at an advanced level. Interestingly, the five students are sharing two textbooks. This detail reflects the shortage of Chinese textbooks and other educational resources in Chinese schools at that time. Hsiang-Shui Chen notes that some of the materials in Chinese schools were compiled by local Chinese teachers and some were imported from China (157). The smile on the boy at the upper right corner shows his intense interest in the book. However, apart from the textbook, we do not see any pens or notebooks on their desks. Are they able to understand the stories in the book and will they remember them after they grow up? We do not know. Yet what we do know is that the Chinese language and culture contained in their textbook are not easy for them to learn. In comparison, all five boys’ American style haircut and dress suggest the ubiquitous American influence outside the classroom.



Figure 28. Benjamin Chinn. “Hip Wo Class 1947”. 1947. Gelatin silver print. *Benjamin Chinn at Home in San Francisco: January 7 - May 31, 2003*, Chinese Historical Society of America Museum and Learning Centre. San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America Museum and Learning Centre, 2003. Page 36. Print.

The third photograph (Figure 29), “School Teacher, Hip Wo 1948”, provides us with another point of view on the Chinese language learning. This time, the subject in the photograph is a teacher at the Hip Wo Chinese School in the San Francisco Chinatown. Under her thick coat, there are traditional Chinese patterns on her black blouse. A necklace in the shape of a Chinese long-life lock hangs around her neck. Her Chinese clothing and necklace contrast sharply with the students’ American hairstyle and dress in the previous two photographs. This comparison reveals that the teacher understands the significance of her Chinese heritage and wishes to preserve it wherever she is. On the blackboard behind her, the six Chinese characters written with chalk imply that this may be a class for beginners. She is holding a pen and possibly



Figure 29. Benjamin Chinn. "School Teacher, Hip Wo 1948". 1948. Gelatin silver print. *Benjamin Chinn at Home in San Francisco: January 7 - May 31, 2003, Chinese Historical Society of America Museum and Learning Centre*. San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America Museum and Learning Centre, 2003. Page 17. Print.

correcting the students' homework. Beneath the homework folder, there lies an old book, which may be the textbook that she has used for many years.

However, what attracts the viewer most are her eyes and facial expression. She looks straight forward but her gaze is not focused. There is a sense of emptiness in her eyes: she seems lost in her thoughts. What is she thinking about in this moment? Is she satisfied with her students' work? Is she worrying about her students' future? Will they drop out soon? Will they still remember what they learned in class when they grow up? These questions in her eyes also

reflect the two generations' different attitudes toward the Chinese language. Nonetheless, the teacher knows clearly that the second-generation Chinese migrant children in her class will have a different life and form their own language, maybe a hybrid of Chinese and English. For the second-generation, this is exactly an unavoidable scenario in their hyphenated lives— to identify and justify their own language.

Now, I will move forward in time from Benjamin Chinn's photographs in the 1940s and 50s to Frank Chin's literary representation of the second generation Chinese Americans in the 1960s and 70s. In Frank Chin's two famous plays, *The Chickencoop Chinaman* and *The Year of the Dragon*, the playwright presents the struggle which the second generation had in forging their own language.

The theme of language is salient in *The Chickencoop Chinaman* and *The Year of the Dragon*. As second-generation Chinese Americans, the two main characters, Tam and Fred, both encounter difficulties in negotiating their bilingual status. First of all, both characters speak a mixed language, not pure English. In *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, Tam is a film writer and producer. He is creating a film about his idol, Ovaltine Jack Dancer, a black boxer. Tam tends to mix all kinds of accents into his own speech. In Frank Chin's words, he is "a multi-tongued word magician" (*The Chickencoop* 3) who changes voice from "W. C. Fields to American Midwest, Bible Belt holy roller, etc." and "jumps between black and white rhythms and accents" (*The Chickencoop* 12). Chin's description indicates that the formation of Tam's language is influenced by multiple sources, for instance, an American Midwest accent, white Christian language, and African American street lingo. What is more, as a Chinese ethnic, his grandma's "Chinamouth" adds another important source for Tam's language (*The Chickencoop* 31). On his travels to produce the film, Tam's encounter with different characters stirs him to rethink his own language.

In *The Year of the Dragon*, Fred, the main character and a Chinatown tourist guide, also speaks a mixed Chinese-English language. When he conducts his tours in Chinatown streets, he speaks English with a Cantonese accent. Yet when he returns home, he speaks English fluently while adding some Cantonese vocabulary words such as “hom sup low” (咸水佬, meaning “pervert”) and “hoong bow” (红包, meaning “red envelope”, a monetary gift for new year).

Neither Tam nor Fred’s language can be categorized as either standard English or Chinese. In Frank Chin’s words, their language, like their identity, is “a miracle synthetic” (*The Chickencoop* 8). It is a compilation of multiple linguistic sources, and it does not belong to any commonly recognized language. In *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, Tam describes this language confusion of many second-generation Chinese Americans as follows: “I speak nothing but the mother tongues bein’ born to none of my own, I talk the talk of orphans” (Chin 8). Although they speak English and understand some Chinese, both languages are foreign to them. The inseparable part of Chinese ancestry embodied in their language makes it difficult for them to possess English fully as their own, while their Chinese appearance contradicts the fact that they barely speak or understand the Chinese language. In *The Year of the Dragon* and *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, Frank Chin assigns the two main characters a script in which they will experience the language dilemma of second-generation Chinese Americans in detail.

In both plays, the main characters are not able to communicate with their parents and other first-generation family members in Chinese. In *The Year of the Dragon*, Fred cannot talk with his birth mother Chinamama, who speaks only Cantonese, while his birth father Pa thinks Fred’s English will never be as perfect as a white American even if he was an English major (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 104). This language failure enlarges the gap between the first and second generation and threatens family cohesion. It is one of the causes of the many conflicts between Fred and Pa in the play.



In *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, Tam also could not understand the old Chinese dishwasher's words or his own grandma's tales when he was young. Shiow-Huey Luo and Richard L. Wiseman point out that for second-generation children, "grandparents can be the best resource for the knowledge of their ethnic culture and language. The liking and respect towards their grandparents may trigger the immigrant children's positive attitude towards their ethnic language and culture identified with their grandparents" (321). Yet, in this play, Tam is nonchalant towards the old Chinese dishwasher, who, in Tam's mind, is "just a crazy dishwasher" taking him to fights (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 17). Without understanding his Chinese dialect, Tam does not perceive that the old dishwasher was in fact using his action to teach Tam that Chinese Americans need to fight against inequality. When Tam tells the death of the old dishwasher to Robbie and others, he does not cry for the deceased (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 17). Besides the old dishwasher, not until the end of the play does Tam realize why his grandmother listened for "The Iron Moonhunter ... til the day she died" and told him the stories of it (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 37). In the legend of Chinese migrant workers, "The Iron Moonhunter" is a train that Chinese railroad workers built from the materials they saved when building the Central Pacific Railroad (Cohn 166). The sound and stories of this train symbolize the outcry and struggle of early Chinese migrant workers. These details in the play suggest Tam's negative attitude towards his mother tongue and hyphenated identity. Van Dan Berg remarks that "ethnolinguistic identities are created through interactions with parents and other family members in the homes and neighborhoods" (254). If the interactions between the first and second generation Chinese immigrants pose problems, it means that the two sides are not using the same language. In other words, the second-generation's hybrid language is no longer the first-generation's.

On the other hand, American society does not consider the language of the second-generation Chinese Americans as standard English. In *Longtime Californ'* Frank Chin tells the

editors that no matter how fluent his English is, a Chinese American can never disappear among the white American English speakers: “Someone, just because they saw my skin color, would detect an accent. Someone would always correct me” (Nee 383). What Chin means is that the American society still tends to judge an individual according to one’s skin color. The “racial” difference implied in his appearance still supersedes the fact that English is his native language. In Frank Chin’s *The Chickencoop Chinaman* and *The Year of the Dragon*, both main characters also run up against the stereotypical perceptions of the way they speak.

In *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, Tam recalls that he was once “praised” by “some white offthewall J.C. Penny’s clerk type with his crispy suit to say I spoke English well” and seemed ““Americanized”” (Chin 26). No doubt, Tam is very angry at this “compliment”. In “Confessions of the Chinatown Cowboy”, Frank Chin severely criticizes the discrimination against second-generation Chinese Americans: “A Chinese can take being told he speaks English pretty good and that he’s pretty ‘Americanized and aggressive’ as compliments, as English and being American for him are the results of conscious effort. The same thing said to a Chinaman are insults” (65). This comment on second-generation Chinese Americans’s English indirectly denies that English is their native language and that their identity is American. A “Chinaman” is not a Chinese, but an American whose mother tongue is English like any other Americans. In the play, Tam meets Charlie Popcorn, who cannot believe that Tam, a Chinese American, is able to speak with a black accent. He questions Tam, “Isn’t it strange, you’re Chinese. ... You don’t talk like a Chinese, do ya?... Why would a Chinese talk like a colored man?” (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 40). Again, even the African Americans assume that Chinese Americans should speak with a Chinese accent, like the fictional detective Charlie Chan.

The assumption that Chinese Americans tend to speak with an accent also appears in *The Year of the Dragon*. As a tourist guide, Fred feels he must imitate Charlie Chan’s accent to cater to the tourists’ stereotypical expectation of an “authentic” Chinatown experience: “No ‘I,’ ‘Me’

or ‘We.’ ... no first person personal pronouns, and instant Chinese culture” (Chin , *The Chickencoop* 114). Yet for Fred, neither the language he uses for his job as guide is the real language he speaks, nor is this his dream job. He wishes to become a Chinese American writer who writes in English. However, he also recognizes the difficulties in writing and selling “the great Chinese American novel”, because Chinese American writing is generally related to cookbooks and not literature in American readers’ minds (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 83). The market does not welcome literature written in standard English by a Chinese American. As the editors of *Aiiieeeee!* point out, “the literary establishment has never considered the fact that a new folk in a strange land would experience the land and develop a new language out of the old worlds” (Chin 22). In other words, the American market will not regard forms of Chinese American language as acceptable English or tolerate a new form of language created by Chinese immigrants.

Therefore, rejected by both Chinese and English speakers, second-generation Chinese Americans often feel confused and lost when it comes to their speaking abilities. They desperately wish to justify their language, without which they are always silenced in North America. In “Back Talk”, Frank Chin differentiates the lack of an acceptable Chinese American language from other ethnic groups’ defense of their languages as follows:

We have no street tongue to flaunt and strut the way the blacks and Chicano do. They have a positive, self-defined linguistic identity that can be offended and wronged. We don’t. With us, it’s dangerous to say anything, dangerous to talk because every time you open your mouth you run the risk of being corrected. The tongue-tying notion that everything out of your mouths is mimicry has been built into our psychology in our seven generations here. (557)

According to Chin, African Americans and Chicano are able to distinguish their language from that of the white Americans, and they feel proud of it; while second-generation Chinese Americans lack that status distinction in their language. Therefore, the challenge of how to create this ethnic form of linguistic distinctiveness becomes a primary task for many Chinese

Americans. Some, as Frank Chin mentions in the previous quote, start by mimicking existing languages, such as black or white Christian English. Some go back to their Chinese origins and the immigrant generation's language. In *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, Tam has gone through all these approaches to find his own language.

Tam's search for a language of his own coincides with his search for a father figure or a role model whose language he might imitate. In this play, Tam has followed four different examples: Helen Keller, the Lone Ranger, Charlie Popcorn, and the old Chinese dishwasher. Helen Keller is known for her success in learning the English language in spite of her deafness and blindness. Her struggle with English mirrors the second-generation Chinese Americans' search for a culturally acceptable language. In *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, Tam describes the similarity between Keller and Chinese Americans: "Helen Keller overcame her handicaps without riot! She overcame her handicaps without looting! She overcame her handicaps without violence! And you Chinks and Japs can too" (Chin 11). As he notes, Helen Keller is able to "speak" and be heard and ultimately master language through a nonviolent approach, so can he and other Chinese immigrants who also lack their own language achieve the same. However, Tam's description implies the passive quality of Helen Keller who "sees no evil, hears no evil, and speaks no evil" (Young 2). In Frank Chin's words, she is "the ideal minority. Not on welfare. Not violent" (Davis, "Frank" 84). She only imitates silently and obediently the language of white Americans. That is to say, she really does not have a voice of her own. This mirrors the perception of Chinese Americans as a model minority in America. According to Robert G. Lee, the reason behind it is that Chinese Americans and Asian Americans "were both politically silent and ethnically assimilable" (256). If Chinese Americans did not have their own language to speak for themselves, they could only either be silent or imitate the language appreciated by the American society. Therefore, lacking their own language leads to the stereotype of a silent model minority.

The second language model that Tam imitates is the Lone Ranger who is an icon of American culture. At the beginning of the play, Tam thinks that the Ranger is really a Chinese American hero behind his mask (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 32). But later this idol turns out to be an “old and decrepit” white racist who comes to Tam in his dream and orders him to go back to Chinatown to preserve his culture (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 32-34). Beyond this verbal insult, the Lone Ranger shoots a silver bullet in Tam’s hand (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 32). Symbolically, this bullet wounds the hand Tam uses for writing in a language that will shatter the Lone Ranger’s status as a national hero. When Tam asks the Lone Ranger why he shot him in the hand, the latter answers, “Nowhere in the pages of history can one find a greater/ Why that was the Lone Ranger” (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 34). In other words, white racists forbid Chinese Americans to use a language that will change the dominant status of white American English.

Tam’s third language model and father figure is Charlie Popcorn, an African American. Since his childhood at the school where “blacks and Maxicans” were the majority, Tam and Kenji had to walk and talk like African American students so that they would not be beaten (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 20). There, Tam obtains an African American accent and a fighting spirit. Later, he starts to worship Ovaltine Jack Dancer, the African American boxer champion, and even kidnaps him to be close to his hero (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 20). After the kidnap, Tam, Kenji, and Ovaltine “all stood out by the car pissing in the bushes” (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 20). This scene reminds Tam of the similar experience when he urinated with another African American dishwasher in the segregated restroom for African Americans in New Orleans (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 20). These experiences enlighten Tam about the similarity between Chinese Americans’ and African Americans’ status in America: both are racialized and marginalized groups. Yet African Americans no doubt have a louder voice and stronger fighting spirit than Chinese Americans. Thus, Tam wants to produce a film about his African American hero and learn from him.

At the beginning, Tam believes that Charlie Popcorn is the father and coach of Ovaltine Jack Dancer. By producing the film, Tam puts himself into Dancer's position. In this way, Charlie Popcorn becomes his surrogate father. However, for critic Daryl J. Maeda, this is "a nongenerative, vulgar, and overly romantic imitation of blackness" (1094). More importantly, second-generation Chinese Americans and African Americans have different language backgrounds: the latter were often born with their language while the former seem to have no language of their own. In "Back Talk", Frank Chin emphasizes this major difference:

Our condition is more delicate than that of the blacks because, unlike the blacks, we have neither an articulated organic sense of our American identity nor the verbal confidence and self-esteem to talk one up from our experience. As a people, we are pre-verbal, pre-literate—afraid of language as the instrument through which the monster takes possession of us. For us American born, both the Asian languages and the English language are foreign. We are a people without a native tongue. (557)

Blind imitation of black language is doomed to failure and disappointment, which leads to disillusionment when Tam later discovers Charlie Popcorn's real identity—he is neither Ovaltine Jack Dancer's father nor a legendary coach. This idolized father figure and his language can no longer serve as Tam's model.

All three language models above fail to help Tam find his own language. Yet through Charlie Popcorn, Tam rediscovers his real father figure, the old Chinese dishwasher. In Tam's memory, the old dishwasher was a "crazy old" man who "used to wear his underpants right in his bath" and would take Tam to "go anywhere to catch a fight" (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 17). At the beginning, Tam denies that the "crazy old dishwasher" is his father, because he believes that the dishwasher only depends on his English to "get around outside Chinatown" (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 17). Tam even laughs at the old dishwasher's poor English and at that of other older generation Chinese immigrants. He quotes "them saying 'Buck duck bagaw' instead of 'giddyup' to their horses" (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 27). In other words, Tam rejects having any connections

to the old dishwasher or to the other first generation of Chinese immigrants whose broken English only makes him feel ashamed.

Yet, after meeting Charlie Popcorn, Tam realizes that he has inherited so much from the old dishwasher. Tam wears swimming trunks all the time, a habit which he picks up from the old dishwasher (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 16). In addition, Charlie Popcorn tells Tam that the old dishwasher who like Tam was also passionate about boxing and chides Tam telling him that he should not turn his back on his “father” no matter how old he is (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 45). In Charlie Popcorn’s mind, the old dishwasher “wasn’t scared” in the fight and “he had dignity” (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 46). Therefore, it is not right for Tam to forget and despise his real father figure, the old Chinese dishwasher. Patricia Chu points out that Tam is “an ethnic verbal construct made of cultural debris, cultural forgetfulness (milk of amnesia), and language” (81). In order to produce his own language, Tam has to refer back to his cultural roots to find his own language, and these roots are symbolized by the old Chinese dishwasher. Tam needs to reestablish the lost link between the dishwasher and himself.

At the end of *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, Tam finds this lost link between himself and the old Chinese dishwasher while in the kitchen. Just as Chinese food becomes the only common language between Fred and Pa in *The Year of the Dragon*, so too does ethnic food reestablish a common inheritance between Tam and the old Chinese dishwasher. Tam calls it the “code of kitchen” (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 63). While cooking Chinese food in the kitchen, where the old Chinese dishwasher worked and lived most of his life, Tam eventually understands the suffering of the old Chinese dishwasher. The old Chinese dishwasher and other first-generation Chinese immigrants express their pain in their hysterical cry, “Buck Buck Bagaw”.

At the beginning of *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, Tam already claims that “the sound truth is that I AM THE NOTORIOUS ONE AND ONLY CHICKENCOOP CHINAMAN HIMSELF that talks in the dark heavy Midnight, the secret Chinatown Buck Buck Bagaw” (Chin, *The*

*Chickencoop* 7). The capital letters reveal Tam's pride of being a Chinese American like no other ethnic groups. Yet, it is not until the end of the play that Tam truly realizes that "Chinatown Buck Buck Bagaw" is the common language, not only for him and the old Chinese dishwasher, but for all American-born Chinese. The phrase "Buck Buck Bagaw" is the onomatopoeia of a chicken crowing. The title "Chickencoop Chinaman" compares Chinese immigrants to the chickens trapped inside a coop, which "refers to [Frank] Chin's perception of Chinatown as a zoo or a dirty, noisy, foul-smelling place occupied by people who speak an unintelligible language" (Young 2). Thus, "Buck Buck Bagaw" symbolizes the "unintelligible language" of these American-born Chinese ethnics. Since it is neither pure English nor Chinese but an embodiment of the unique struggle and anger of the Chinese immigrants, it is unintelligible to outsiders. By adopting the "Buck Buck Bagaw", second-generation Chinese Americans inherit the first generation Chinese immigrants' voice and language.

More importantly, for second-generation Chinese Americans this "unintelligible Buck Buck Bagaw" challenges the English language hierarchy in North America. As a writer, Tam's struggle among various languages and eventual settlement on the *Chickencoop Chinaman's* "Buck Buck Bagaw" reflects Frank Chin's endeavor to justify the language of Chinese immigrants. Chin is always angry at white Americans when they criticize his grammar and style. He protests that "they want to correct my grammar or something. They say that my style is difficult. Well, it should be. It's a new language. It's Chinese-American. I'm not writing white. I'm very consciously trying to write Chinese-American" (Nee 385). In his mind, "Buck Buck Bagaw" symbolizes Chinese immigrants' own language. It is "beautiful" (Chin, *The Chickencoop* 116) and will break the tyranny of white American English and writing (Nee 385). In other words, Chinese immigrants and ethnics need to tell their own stories in their own language regardless of the prevailing standards.



In the groundbreaking anthology of Asian American writers, *Aiiieeeee!*, Frank Chin, Jeffrey Chan, Lawson Inada, and Shawn Wong emphasize how important and necessary it is for Chinese Americans to create and acknowledge a language of their own:

Language is the medium of culture and the people's sensibility, including the style of manhood. Language coheres the people into a community by organizing and codifying the symbols of the people's common experience. Stunt the tongue and you have lopped off the culture and sensibility. On the simplest level, a man in any culture speaks for himself. Without a language of his own, he no longer is a man. (xlviii)

By identifying a common language, an ethnic group unites and empowers each individual's voice. A common language also offers an ethnic group a path to assert their independence and unique identity. The editors of *Aiiieeeee!* state that "Blacks and Chicanos often write in unconventional English. Their particular vernacular is recognized as being their own legitimate mother tongue" (Chin, xliii- xlv). They want to know why Chinese Americans cannot have their own language as well?

For the second-generation Chinese Americans, having their own language is crucial. Due to their poor handling of English, the older generation of Chinese immigrants are not able to make their voice heard or participate in the North American society. Shih-shan Henry Tsai notes that "creative works before World War II, written almost exclusively in the Chinese language, were rare and rather unsophisticated" (140). Thus, the voice and influence of these first immigrants in North America was very limited. In comparison, the second-generation Chinese immigrants are born with the advantage of being able to speak English. In addition, they are brought up in an environment of Chinese language and culture at home. So second-generation Chinese Americans are able to connect the first generation to the Western world and speak for them. In this way, the second-generation can break the silence characterizing the entire Chinese ethnic group in the U.S. and assume the right to tell their own stories and those of the immigrant generation. This is a task facing the second-generation Chinese Americans and Chinese migrant

writers as well: they must “legitimize the language, style, and syntax of his people's experience, to codify the experiences common to his people into symbols, clichés, linguistic mannerisms, and a sense of humor that emerges from an organic familiarity with the experience” (Chin, *Aiiieeeee!* xxxvii). Once the language of the second-generation and its writers are legitimized in the American culture at large, their stories and writings will earn the appreciation and respect they merit as a competing ethnic group in the nation's multi-ethnic society.

### 3.3 Writing in an adopted language

In the previous parts of Chapter 2, I have discussed the language issue of first- and second-generation Chinese Americans. In this part, I will focus on the topic of Chinese migrant writers writing in an adopted language. After the 1989 Tiananmen Square protest and violence in Beijing, many Chinese students and scholars studying in North America decided to remain abroad. Some of them, for example, Ha Jin, Ying Chen, and Qiu Xiaolong, became migrant writers writing in English or French. Since all of these writers have chosen to write in the language of their host countries, it is worth considering the reasons for doing so and the difficulties they have to face in order to become accomplished writers. I will analyze Ha Jin's novel *A Free Life* to illustrate Chinese migrant writers' efforts at writing in an adopted language.

*A Free Life* covers several themes on Chinese migrant writers: their social responsibility, the confrontation between daily life and artistic pursuit, nationalism and patriotism, and the meaning of homeland, just to name a few. One of the salient themes among them is Chinese migrant writers' language. Ha Jin's main character, Nan Wu, came to America to study in a PhD program in political science in 1985. After the Tiananmen Square protest, Nan was disappointed at the political situation in China and his own study in political science. He soon dropped out of the program and aspired to become a poet in America. On his road to becoming a poet, he encounters a series of challenges: how to find a job and be materially independent, how to

balance work, family, and poetry, and how to write and even publish poetry in English. At the same time, Nan has worked hard in various kinds of jobs to support his family, such as night watchman, custodian, waiter, journal editor, cook, and eventually restaurant owner. At the end Nan gives up his profitable restaurant business and works as a front desk clerk at a motel. He is satisfied with this decision, because he can then devote his time and energy to writing poetry in English.

In addition to the main character Nan Wu, Ha Jin creates a few other Chinese migrant writers in *A Free Life*. Yet unlike Nan who is determined to write poetry in English, the others escape from this challenge. Nan's friend Danning Meng returns to China to continue his writing in Chinese. The editor in chief of the literary journal *New Lines*, Bao Yuan, gives up writing poetry completely due to his low English proficiency and turns to painting instead. Each of these writers resolve the difficulties of writing in an adopted language in their own distinct ways.

As a migrant writer himself, Ha Jin infuses his contemplation on writing in an adopted language into the creation of *A Free Life*. In a dialogue with Mindy Zhang, Ha Jin points out that this novel is not just about the everyday lives of any Chinese immigrants but the “emotional and spiritual existence of some dislocated people” (32). Clearly, Chinese migrant writers’ language dilemma is a major focus in the novel. Readers may see some similarities between Ha Jin and the main character Nan Wu in *A Free Life*. Both left China to study in America and decided to stay after the Tiananmen Square protest; both are disappointed by Chinese society and politics; both took “odd jobs (a night watchman, a busboy)” before eventually publishing in English (Weich). Even so, Ha Jin clarifies that “The big story is not autobiographical at all. ... In fact, Nan Wu as a character was inspired by an owner of a small restaurant in Waltham, MA, who was a new immigrant from Hong Kong, writing traditional Chinese poetry and has self-published a book” (Zhang, “A Conversation” 29). Nor was Ha Jin ever involved in restaurant business. However, in another recent interview, the author does not deny the connection between Nan and

himself. He says, “emotionally, a good piece of fiction is autobiographical — the author must have some kind of emotional obsession with the subject, which relates one way or another to his or her existence... I had to live through the immigrant experience to understand its complexities and nuances” (“Ha Jin's Immigrant” 03F). Thus, what Ha Jin suggests is that while *A Free Life* is inspired by another Chinese immigrant’s real story, he himself has gone through experiences like those of the main character in the novel. He shares the difficulties and sufferings Nan faces in the process of writing in an adopted language. Ha Jin’s novel successfully tells these migrant writers’ struggles.

In 2008, one year after the publication of *A Free Life*, Ha Jin released a collection of critical essays titled *The Writer as Migrant*. This book includes three essays: “The Spokesman and the Tribe”, “The Language of Betrayal”, and “An Individual’s Homeland”. In the first essay, Ha Jin questions whether a migrant writer can speak for the people of his mother country. In the second essay, he discusses the idea that writing in an adopted language is a betrayal of one’s original country and people, and justifies why migrant writers must do so. In the last essay, he discusses the meaning of “homeland” to migrant writers and how to express the “homeland”. These are the questions that migrant writers like himself and the characters in *A Free Life* often receive. Thus, *The Writer as Migrant* helps us to better understand the main character in *A Free Life* and Ha Jin’s opinion about the issue of Chinese migrant writers writing in an adopted language. With *A Free Life* and *The Writer as Migrant* in mind, I would now like to discuss the following three questions on Chinese migrant writers from Ha Jin’s perspective: why do they choose to write in an adopted language; what challenges do they face when writing in an adopted language; and how do they overcome those challenges.

Ha Jin answered several times in different occasions to the first question of why migrant writers write in an adopted language. One word can summarize his answers—“survival”. In an interview with Chen Aimin, Ha Jin states that, “I write in English and mean to claim my

existence in this language. All this is due to the fact that I simply cannot write in Chinese here. I have to survive as an individual and as a writer” (4). In order to survive outside China, Ha Jin confesses that he does not have a choice but to give up writing in Chinese. Then how do we understand his survival “as an individual and as a writer”?

In *The Writer as Migrant*, Ha Jin gives us a fuller explanation. He writes that “in fact, physical survival is just one side of the picture, and there is the other side, namely, to exist — to live a meaningful life. To exist also means to make the best use of one's life, to pursue one's vision” (Ha 32). Physical survival is associated with a migrant writer's livelihood. Writing in Chinese is impractical for Chinese migrant writers who wish to make a living outside China. Then there is the spiritual survival of a migrant writer who wishes to fulfill his dream and ambitions in another language. Instead of using himself as an example, Ha Jin quotes Joseph Brodsky's observation to continue his elaboration on surviving in another language: “When a writer resorts to a language other than his mother tongue, he does so either out of necessity, like Conrad, or because of burning ambition, like Nabokov, or for the sake of greater estrangement, like Beckett” (357). Yet in Ha Jin's opinion, the three reasons (necessity, ambition and estrangement) “usually come to bear at the same time” (*The Writer* 33). That is to say, often, the pressure that forces a migrant writer to write in another language comes from all these three factors together. Although in *The Writer as Migrant*, Ha Jin does not discuss the three aspects according to his own experience, in *A Free Life* the main character Nan's struggle between writing in Chinese and English supports Ha Jin's argument.

The need for an immigrant to survive in a new country leads him to focus on making a living. In *A Free Life*, it takes some time for Nan to realize that writing in English is the only practical choice he has. At first, Nan plans to change his major from political science to Chinese poetry. However, after Tiananmen Square protest, he notices that “the student enrollments in the Chinese language and studies had dropped so drastically that many American colleges had begun

to scale down their Chinese programs” (Ha, *A Free* 29). So it was almost impossible for him to study Chinese poetry at that time. Nevertheless, Nan is still reluctant to give up writing poetry in Chinese. Nan’s wife Pingping points out sharply to Nan that “You’ll have no chance if you do that. ... Where can you have your writings published?” (Ha, *A Free* 55). This is a question that Nan is unable to answer. Due to the fact that Chinese language literature is such a minor field in America, Nan has to switch from writing in Chinese to English, which is more likely to establish him as a poet here. This leads to the second reason why Chinese migrant writers write in another language — ambition.

In *A Free Life*, even though Nan has worked in many jobs and later lives a stable, American middle-class existence, he never gives up “writing in English and dreaming of becoming another Conrad or Nabokov” (Ha, *A Free* 496). These two writers are Nan’s idols, because they write in an adopted language and are acknowledged by the English world. He is willing to sacrifice what he has achieved to follow their footsteps. He knows undoubtedly that he does not “want to die a successful businessman” (Ha, *A Free* 419). He needs to rid himself of all other distractions and concentrate on writing poetry. Thus, at the end of the novel, without much hesitation, he sells his restaurant and becomes a front desk clerk at a motel. In this way, he can practice his English and write poetry in the quiet of the night without disturbance.

Nan’s ambition mirrors Ha Jin’s; and like Nan, Ha Jin admires Joseph Conrad and Vladimir Nabokov. Ha Jin admits in an interview that “for a long time I couldn't decide whether to write in English because I knew there was this tradition: Conrad and Nabokov, those giants there” (Ha and Gogwilt). He understands the distance between them and himself. In order to learn from them, in his *The Writer as Migrant*, Ha Jin analyzes in depth the writing styles and perspectives of these two writers. Writing in English reveals Ha Jin’s desire to emulate these literary giants.

In addition to necessity and ambition, estrangement is the third reason that migrant writers write in an adopted language. It includes the estrangement from one's native country and language. In *A Free Life*, Nan's Chinese passport was canceled years before he received his American passport. For many years, he was unable to visit his home country, not to mention publish any of his works in Chinese in China. Yet in Atlanta, "obscure and unpublished, he was completely isolated from the Chinese writers' community, which was centered in New York" (Ha, *A Free* 423). So, again, there is little chance of his publishing Chinese poetry in his adopted country. The only choice left for Nan is to write in English. However, the estrangement from one's native country and language is not necessarily a disadvantage in Ha Jin's eyes. It can free migrant writers from the restraints of their past country and language.

In *A Free Life*, the experience of Danning Meng provides a cautionary tale about the constraints of writing in one's native language in his mother country. Seeing no hope of writing in English in America, Danning returns to China to resume writing in Chinese. Soon he feels the restrictions of writing in his native language in China. Despite the "fame as the leading figure in the overseas student literature", he "pandered too much to the Chinese readers' taste and depended too heavily on exotic details and on nationalistic sentiment to make his stories work. That in effect made his fiction simplistic, glib, and even clunky in places" (Ha, *A Free* 473). He confesses to Nan that he does not have a choice but to follow the instructions of the Chinese authorities: "If you lived here, Nan, you'd have to forget about literature. The higher-ups want us to write about dead people and ancient events because this is a way to make us less subversive and more inconsequential. It's their means of containing China's creative energy and talents. The saddest part is that in this way we can produce only transient work" (Ha, *A Free* 532). Danning's words disclose the strict censorship and control over writers and literature in China. However, if a work is true literature and art, it has to be critical to the society. As Theodor W. Adorno writes in *Aesthetic Theory*, "art is the social antithesis of society, not directly deducible from it" (8).

What is more, “only works that expose themselves to every risk have the chance of living on, not those that out of fear of the ephemeral cast their lot with the past” (Adorno 34). Under the strict censorship of the Chinese government, writers like Danning can only write about “the dead people and ancient events”, which are safe topics and do not inspire the readers to contemplate on the problems in today’s society. This kind of work does not have the chance to experience its readers’ discussion or criticism. It disappears quickly in the history of literature.

In *The Writer as Migrant*, Ha Jin remarks that “the worst crime the country commits against the writer is to make him unable to write with honesty and artistic integrity” (32). Due to censorship and propaganda of literature in China, Danning in *A Free Life* has to write what the government tells him to write. In contrast, writing in English allows Nan to transcend those barriers and sever his links to his past. Nan understands that English means the present and future to him. He tells himself, “my subject matter would eventually be American, so I should get myself ready for the task of speaking in the American idiom. I mustn’t live in the past and must focus on the present and the future” (Ha, *A Free* 626). These words as well explain Ha Jin’s decision to give up writing in Chinese. As he tells Chen Aimin, “If I wrote in Chinese, I would be at the mercy of the Chinese authorities. In this sense, English does mean freedom, though I always feel crippled in this language” (Chen, “Claim”4). Although writing in a new language has its limits, he enjoys more freedom in it than when writing in Chinese. Salman Rushdie comments on the linguistic struggle of migrant writers, noting that “to conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free” (17). It is a challenging process of claiming a position and a voice in a new language. Once a migrant writer accomplishes this task, he will obtain the freedom to speak for himself in this language. The title of Ha Jin’s *A Free Life* also means this.

The Chinese Canadian writer Ying Chen decided to write in French for the same reason as Nan and Ha Jin. As she writes in *Quatre mille marches*, «en fait, écrire en français peut être considéré, au moins au départ, comme un geste de révolte, plutôt inconscient, contre certains



éléments de l'éducation que j'ai reçue dans la langue chinoise» (38). Whenever she writes in Chinese, it is difficult to free herself from the rules and confinement of the Chinese language education she received in China. Writing in a new language provides her with a way to write outside those previous restrictions. By writing in an unfamiliar language, she also faces the risk of not possessing any languages of her own (Ying, *Quatre* 38). Still she prefers to write in French than her mother tongue, because, in her opinion, this foreign language «semble être le seul support de [s]on existence flottante» (Ying, *Quatre* 38-39). Writing in an unfamiliar language mirrors the floating state in her migrant life. It opens up limitless possibilities. When speaking about this change to another language, she characterizes it by using the verb “renaître” — to be reborn (*Quatre* 38).

Nonetheless, these Chinese migrant writers who write in an adopted language are often criticized for betraying their homeland, China. In *The Writer as Migrant*, Ha Jin responds to this criticism. He admits that “the ultimate betrayal is to choose to write in another language. No matter how the writer attempts to rationalize and justify adopting a foreign language, it is an act of betrayal that alienates him from his mother tongue and directs his creative energy to another language” (*The Writer* 31). Yet he also points out that betrayal is bidirectional. He questions, “historically, it has always been the individual who is accused of betraying his country. Why shouldn't we turn the tables by accusing a country of betraying the individual?” (Ha, *The Writer* 31). Although in *The Writer as Migrant* Ha Jin does not explicitly write that China has betrayed him, clearly he expresses his anger towards the country. However, a year after the publication of *The Writer as Migrant*, he complains frankly in *New York Times* that “I feel I have been betrayed by China, which has suppressed its people and made artistic freedom unavailable. I have tried to write honestly about China and preserve its real history. As a result, most of my work cannot be published in China” (“Exiled” WK9). Of the fourteen books he has published, only *Waiting* and *Nanjing Requiem* have been translated and published in mainland China. All his other books

have been banned because of their sensitive political and historical contents. In Ha Jin's mind, the censorship and suppression of writers' free speech reveals a country's betrayal of its people and writers. Writing in English represents Ha Jin's protest against this betrayal.

After discussing why Ha Jin and other Chinese migrant writers choose to write in an adopted language, now I will present the difficulties they face in learning to write in another language. In the novel *A Free Life*, the main character Nan experiences some of the typical difficulties that a Chinese migrant writer regularly encounters. Since the beginning of the novel, Nan perceives the enormous hardship in front of Chinese migrant writers. He once visited the Museum of Chinese Immigrant Culture and noticed that there was so little artwork by Chinese immigrants. He asks, "How come there's no Picasso or Faulkner or Mozart that emerged from the immigrants? Does this mean the first Chinese here were less creative and less artistic?" (Ha, *A Free* 108). Of course this assumption about Chinese migrant artists is not true. Still, Nan's observation reflects the fact that Chinese migrant artists, including writers, have to overcome more difficulties than native artists to achieve success. As a migrant writer himself, Ha Jin remarks that "for most migrant writers today, displacement makes them more vulnerable and their existence more haphazard, since they cannot fall back on any significant past and must struggle to survive in new places" (*The Writer* 23). In the case of Chinese migrant writers, they usually cannot retreat to writing in Chinese and must find their position in an adopted language. Through reading Ha Jin's *A Free Life* and *The Writer as Migrant*, we can summarize three types of difficulties that Chinese migrant writers face when writing in an adopted language: lack of confidence, low language proficiency, and hierarchical market standards.

Starting from the first difficulty, Chinese migrant writers need to build up confidence in writing in a new language. Throughout the novel *A Free Life*, Nan lacks confidence when writing in English. One of the reasons is that he does not know "anybody who has written significant

poetry in an adawpted<sup>7</sup> language” (Ha, *A Free* 263). Thus, he sees no hope or possibility of becoming such a forerunner. At the same time, he is “frightened by the overwhelming odds against writing in English artistically” (Ha, *A Free* 472). This fear leads Nan to find various excuses, such as raising his family, the loss of his lover, lack of inspiration, no connection, and so forth. These excuses help him to avoid confronting the challenge head on. Not until the end of the novel does he regain the courage to face his fear:

the fear of becoming a joke in others’ eyes, of messing up his life without getting anywhere, of abandoning the useless, burdensome part of his past in order to create a new frame of reference for himself, of moving toward the future without looking back. It was this fear that had driven him to look for inspiration elsewhere other than in his own heart. It was this fear that had misled him into the belief that the difficulties in writing poetry in English were insurmountable and that he couldn’t possibly write lines that were natural and energetic. (Ha, *A Free* 604-05)

After this final realization, Nan begins to write poetry in English again, thereby overcoming his doubts and fears. I have already analyzed the reason behind Chinese immigrants’ fear of using English in Ha Jin’s short story “An English Professor”. Because of their foreign origin, Chinese immigrants feel compelled to justify their identity and language in a new country. They often feel that English is not and will never be their language. This is the same reason why Chinese migrant writers feel as if they lack confidence when they write in English.

Then, there is the difficulty of having to master a new language. Unlike ordinary immigrants, Chinese migrant writers are usually required to be proficient at writing their adopted language. This is a painful process. Nabokov compares his “complete switch from Russian prose to English prose” to “learning anew to handle things after losing seven or eight fingers in an explosion” (*Strong* 106). Their linguistic disadvantage demands an even greater effort from migrant writers. In *A Free Life*, Nan makes a great effort to improve his English in order to achieve his dream of being a poet. He seizes “every opportunity to learn English,” and

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<sup>7</sup> Ha Jin uses the spelling “adawpted” to imitate Nan’s pronunciation of “adopted” with an accent.

“whenever Nan ha[s] a free moment at work, he w[ill] read his *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*,” which he carries with him all the time (Ha, *A Free* 192). He also keeps a poetry diary to help him write and think in English. Nan’s perseverance improves his English writing steadily. His two English poems are later accepted by a literary journal called *Yellow Leaves* (Ha, *A Free* 626).

However, this does not mean that Chinese migrant writers can easily excel at writing in an adopted language. In fact, they have to accept the fact that perhaps they will never be perfect in their use of a second language. In *A Free Life*, Nan recounts that although he has successfully published two English poems, he receives more rejections than acceptances and constant criticism of his English usage. The editor of *Arrows* Gail Upchurch urges Nan to “quit writing poetry” and tells him, “you are wasting your time. English is too hard for you” (Ha, *A Free* 626). Of course, Nan knows that his English will never be flawless and compares his effort to “waging a losing battle” (Ha, *A Free* 626). As a matter of fact, not only amateur migrant writers, but also eminent ones feel despair over their quest to write like a native speaker. In an interview Nabokov once admitted to his difficulties: “The absence of a natural vocabulary. . . . My English . . . is however a stiffish, artificial thing, which may be all right for describing a sunset or an insect, but which cannot conceal poverty of syntax and paucity of domestic diction when I need the shortest road between warehouse and shop” (*Strong* 106). Nabokov’s words nicely capture the dilemma migrant writers face when writing in their adopted language.

Nonetheless, such hardships do not stop migrant writers from trying. In *A Free Life*, Gail Upchurch’s critical comments do not destroy Nan’s courage and determination to be a poet. Even though Nan is fighting “a losing battle”, he already accepts himself “as a loser who has nothing to lose anymore”; for him, “to write poetry is to exist” (Ha, *A Free* 626). Considering the significance of spiritual existence, the barrier of language turns out to be less threatening to migrant writers. Ying Chen equates writing in French to Sisyphus pushing the rock up the hill.

«La langue française est cette pierre qui quelquefois m'échappe, d'autre fois me réconforte, mais jamais ne m'appartiendra de façon absolue. Les mots se moquent de moi et les phrases se décomposent dans ma tête. ... Je ne serai jamais certaine de maîtrise de cette langue, c'est pourquoi elle me paraîtra toujours séduisante» (*Quatre* 27). She understands that she will never master French, yet this is what really attracts her and pushes her to keep writing. In her mind, writing in an adopted language is not different from any other kind of artistic creation in general (Ying, *Quatre* 27). Artists all struggle to find a way to express themselves.

Apart from the lack of confidence and language proficiency, the hierarchical aspect of the literary marketplace and discriminating critical authorities are other difficulties that Chinese migrant writers face. For immigrants, literature is rarely a promising career. In *A Free Life*, Nan notices:

many Chinese students in the humanities and social sciences, having realized they might have to live in the United States for good, had changed their fields in order to make themselves more marketable. ... some people who had been writing dissertations on Shakespeare or Dewey or Tocqueville had decided to go to business or law school. More amazing, in some cases their advisors encouraged them to switch fields and even wrote recommendations for them. (Ha 29)

Migrant students in the humanities and social sciences, including literature, often are less marketable than those in other fields. Unlike humanities, in other fields, language is usually not immigrants' biggest obstacle to achieve success. Yet in the field of literature, if a migrant writer wishes to make a living by his writing, he has to be perfect in language in order to publish his work. Beyond that, the publishing market is another daunting area for them.

In *A Free Life*, through his American poet friend, Dick Harrison, Nan has a glimpse of the complicated world of poets and publishers. Dick tells Nan that "in the poetry world, the competition is all the more fierce. ... most poets live in cliques, otherwise it would be hard for us to survive. The network is essential" (Ha, *A Free* 306). In other words, poets in America tend to form writing groups or cling to other famous poets as patrons to help them get published. Dick

Harrison is friends with several influential poets, including Sam Fisher and Edward Neary. Ha Jin bases the character Sam Fisher on poet Allen Ginsberg (Zhang, “A Conversation” 31). In Nan’s eyes, Sam is a “free spirit” and is not “afraid of anything or anybody, a complete individual” (Ha, *A Free* 153). However, only when a poet reaches Sam’s level will publishers publish whatever he writes. Dick Harrison still worries about his future even after publishing a book. He says to Nan, “Once you’ve lost your publisher, you’re ruined” (Ha, *A Free* 437). Most poets have to rely on publishers to make a living. In contrast, Edward Neary is more powerful than his publishers. Mr. Neary is editing “an anthology of poetry by young poets for a New York publisher” and calls himself “a maker and breaker of poets” (Ha, *A Free* 303). As the editor of a significant anthology, he can help to make or break a poet’s reputation by including or excluding his work in his compilation. All these people, Dick Harrison, Sam Fisher, Edward Neary and publishers, form a complex literary network that portrays the intricacies of the literary world. In comparison, as a beginning Chinese migrant writer, Nan is isolated from this American literature world. He does not belong to any writers’ groups or have any influential patrons who will give him a hand. Thus, he is more vulnerable than native writers.

Beyond that, Chinese migrant writers sometimes meet up with another obstacle: xenophobic literary authorities and publishers. In *A Free Life*, the editor of *Arrows* Gail Upchurch tries to dissuade Nan from writing poetry in English and advises him to write prose instead. She explains that “the main function of prose is to tell a story. But poets should have a different kind of ambition, i.e., to enter into the language they use. Can you imagine your work becoming part of our language?” (Ha, *A Free* 628). In the mind of such narrow-minded authorities, poetry, which expresses the very essence of a language, should be written by native speakers only. Since migrant writers often seek to express the language and culture of a specific ethnic group, their writing fails to target mainstream speech and literary tradition. In his article

“Tongue-Tied Eloquence: Notes on Language, Exile, and Writing”, Stanislaw Baranczak

analyzes the logic behind this kind of argument as follows:

Literature is something more than glib writing. It also includes the right— and necessity— to violate glibness, to make light of rules, to speak in a novel way without bothering to be correct. In literature, a new thought cannot emerge except from a new way of speaking: in order to say anything relevant, you must break a norm. And this is precisely what an outsider cannot afford, since if breaking is to make any sense at all, you may break only the norms that bind you, not those that bind someone else. If a native writer purposely violates language, it’s called progress; if an outsider does it, it’s called malapropism. (250-51)

According to Baranczak, only native writers seem to enjoy the right to break the linguistic norms and innovate a culture’s language, a process which is essential to literary creation. Any attempts by ethnic or migrant writers to change the norms of that language are often seen as marginal to mainstream culture.

However, this stance ignores the fact that most languages, including English, are not pure but hybrid. In *A Free Life*, Nan does not bother to respond to Gail Upchurch's naive criticism, because he understands that “the vitality of English has partly resulted from its ability to assimilate all kinds of alien energies” (Ha, 628). English has a long history of absorbing features from other languages and it is still evolving today. Ha Jin also emphasizes in an interview that “of course, in practice there are always bigots who uphold the purity of English as a yardstick. But the standard idiom cannot always describe the actual immigrant experience, which needs more diverse idioms” (Zhang, “A Conversation” 33). Thus, the introduction of new expressions from migrant writers is unavoidable in contemporary English language literature. In his essay “In Defense of Foreignness”, Ha Jin goes even further and praises migrant writers’ contribution to the English language: “Once we enter a foreign terrain in our fiction, standard English may have to be stretched to cover the new territory. Ultimately this is a way to expand the capacity of the language, a kind of enrichment” (466). Therefore, Chinese migrant writers should not feel

handicapped or intimidated when writing in an adopted language, because their unique expressions have the potential to create new cultural and linguistic standards.

And yet, even if Chinese migrant writers like Nan are able to publish their work, the lack of an audience represents another challenge. As he recounts in *A Free Life*, among the many literary journals to which Nan has submitted poems, only one small journal, *Yellow Leaves*, accepted his two poems and had “published some Asian American authors” in the past (Ha 591). However, the title of this journal may be a joke that Ha Jin makes on Nan. The “yellow” in the title suggests that this journal may be started by or for Asian Americans. Yet the image of “yellow leaves” can signify the coming death of this journal or the market for Asian American writers. Nan feels that he writes for “no audience” and speaks “to emptiness” (Ha, *A Free* 591). Compared with the great Western literary tradition, the major readers in America are either not interested in Chinese migrant writers’ work or do not know the existence of these minority writers. A good example of this is Bao Yuan’s bilingual literary journal *New Lines*, which publishes Chinese migrant writers’ work but is forced to close for economic reasons. In *A Free Life*, Bao proposes to expand this strictly literary journal “to include articles on current events and social issues, and even a few advertisements” in order to save the journal (Ha, 121). Although this proposal is rejected by other editors, they decide not to pay the authors whose work is printed in the journal. This decision unquestionably discourages Chinese migrant writers. In short, Chinese migrant writers have fewer avenues of publication to make their voices heard and fewer readers than native writers.

So far we have analyzed the difficulties that Chinese migrant writers face when writing in an adopted language, i.e. lack of confidence, dubious language proficiency, scarce audience, a low position in publishing market, and often uninterested editors. Next, I will explore possible solutions to these difficulties from Ha Jin’s perspective. The first solution Ha Jin proposes is that Chinese migrant writers need to find their own ways of writing. Throughout *A Free Life*, Nan



works incessantly to figuring out “his own way of making poetry” (Ha 409). He tries various themes and perspectives, such as family, love, nature, and patriotism. He seeks to create “a different angle from which he could reconceive his project, which had the ultimate goal of making his poems dark, luminous, and starkly elegant” (Ha, *A Free* 515). These qualities, in Nan’s opinion, will bring a new life to his limited ability to write in English.

Moreover, Ha Jin believes that each migrant writer has his own unique way of expression. He remarks, “I am a writer, trying to be an artist, and for such a calling, one has to be an individual to begin with, because literature is not produced by groups” (Zhang, “A Conversation” 32). He believes in the voice and power of each individual writer but not migrant writers as a group. Also, in *The Writer as Migrant*, he writes, “Writers do not make good generals, and today literature is ineffective at social change. All the writer can strive for is a personal voice” (Ha 29). Ha Jin’s pessimistic attitude toward the possibility of creating a united collective voice of ethnic or migrant writers is in a sharp contrast to Frank Chin’s belief in the existence of a common language, “Buck Buck Bagaw”, which, according to him, all Chinese American writers should adopt as a weapon to fight for equal rights. Perhaps the reason for this difference is that in the 1970s, when Frank Chin introduced the concept of “Buck Buck Bagaw”, Asian American writers (let alone Chinese migrant writers) were practically invisible in American literary culture. By coming together as representatives of their ethnic group, Chinese American — and Asian American — writers were able to win the kind of attention other ethnic writers enjoyed. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, a large number of Chinese migrant writers have emerged and have won various significant literary prizes. Their writings are also more diversified than those of Frank Chin’s generation. Thus, Ha Jin’s claim about the need for each migrant writer to develop his own style is reasonable, too.

In *A Free Life*, we have a fine example of a contemporary Chinese migrant writer’s unique style. Since the topic and characters of this novel are Chinese immigrants, Ha Jin intentionally

writes in ungrammatical English in order to mimic their speech in real life. For example, Nan often pronounces “thank you” and “another” as “sank you” and “anozzer”. Another Chinese immigrant, Shubo Gao, often uses Chinese idioms which he then translates into English, such as “one hill cannot be inhabited by two tigers”, “search for a needle in the ocean”, “pour oil on fire”, and so forth. Ha Jin has chosen to highlight these immigrant language features in this novel. And in the process, he has also formed his own writing style. In a sense, Ha Jin is able to turn flawed English into an advantage when writing about Chinese immigrants.

In part, Ha Jin learns this method from his idol, Nabokov. In *The Writer as Migrant*, Ha Jin compliments Nabokov for the “word games” he plays in his English writings. In Ha Jin’s eyes, expressions such as “how time crawls!” and “I miss America—even Miss America” bring delight and freshness to English literature. Ha Jin argues that “they are of a different order, more exciting and more original—based on the misuse and distortion of words and grammar and often originated from mistakes. After Nabokov, who can say nonnative writers cannot crack jokes in English?” (51). Nabokov does not let English mistakes and substandard usage become obstacles to literary creation; rather, they increase the playfulness and charm of his books. In the words of the narrator of *Pnin*, “Genius is non-conformity” (Nabokov 89). Ethnic and migrant writers often violate the rules of an adopted language in order to create something new and innovative—just as their ethnic communities are contributing something new to American society.

Another solution to the challenge of writing in an adopted language which Ha Jin offers is to write about themes that transcend language. Some themes are universal and transcend cultural boundaries, no matter in which language they are expressed. By deploying such themes, migrant writers have a better chance to reach a wider audience. In *The Writer as Migrant*, Ha Jin analyzes the success of Lin Yutang (1895-1976), another Chinese migrant writer. Lin Yutang wrote his first English book, *My Country and My People*, when he was still in China in 1935 (Ha, *The*

*Writer* 13). He wished to introduce China and the Chinese people to American readers through this book. One year later, he emigrated to America to “devote himself to writing in English” (Ha, *The Writer* 13). During the next several decades, he published a large number of books in English. The majority of them are about the culture and society of China. However, Ha Jin notes that “among all his books written in English, only this novel [*Chinatown Family*] and his masterpiece of nonfiction *The Importance of Living* remain in print in English” to this day (Ha, *The Writer* 18). The first one is about Chinese immigrant’s experience in America, while the second is a book of philosophy on how to live a meaningful life. Ha Jin concludes that “often it is not the language but the subject matter and the content that determine the life of a book” (Ha, *The Writer* 18). American readers’ curiosity about the faraway and exotic Chinese society may decrease, but a story set in America is always something tangible and can be related to American readers. Also, a philosophical meditation about living a meaningful life is universal and significant to readers in every language and culture. That is to say, sometimes it is not the language but the content of the writing that will help Chinese migrant writers win more readers. This coincides with the kind of poetry that Nan imagines in *A Free Life*. It can “speak directly to the readers’ hearts regardless of their cultural and ethnic backgrounds” (Ha 473).

In Ha Jin’s opinion, Chinese migrant writers must be loyal to their art (*The Writer* 60). No matter what kind of style, expression, or content they invent in the adopted language, they must be true to themselves. If their work is genuine literature, “the artistic spirit will survive and can resonate to other audiences” (Ha, *The Writer* 60). Most importantly, real writers, and that includes Chinese migrant writers, must write for themselves. They must imbue their work with their very spirit. In Nan’s words, “It’s a kind of work that can keep me emotionally balanced and functioning better as a human being. So I write only because I have to” (Ha, *A Free* 628).

Challenges from a new language will not stop them from writing.

## **Chapter 4. Destroy stereotypes and redefine the identity of Chinese immigrants**

In the previous two chapters, I have discussed the different backgrounds and language issues of Chinese immigrants. In Chapter 4, I will focus on their efforts at counteracting negative Chinese-American stereotypes in the past and present, while at the same time redefining their identity. There are three parts to this chapter: 1) a discussion of the stereotypes themselves; 2) the struggle against these stereotypes; 3) the attempt to redefine Chinese migrant identity. In the first part, I start from George Grantham Bain's stereotypical photographs of the Chinese immigrants in the New York Chinatown in the 1910s and 1920s. The photographs produced by his news photography service reflected the biased depiction of Chinese immigrants from the perspective of the American media: they were different, inferior, and did not belong here. In contrast, Chinese migrant amateur photographer Mary Tape captured images of Chinese immigrants in the 1890s and 1910s from a completely different angle: they were the same as other white Americans. Being a promoter of civil-rights as well as a photographer, Tape argued that Chinese immigrant children should have access to a free public education. In the second part of Chapter 4, I will analyze Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and see how she reacts against the stereotypes of Chinese American women. Her autobiographical novel has inspired a heated debate on writing about stereotypes: for instance, critics have asked whether Kingston herself is distorting Chinese immigrants' culture and image in the novel. As further photographic evidence, I will introduce Corky Lee, a contemporary Chinese American photographer and illustrate how his work helps to destroy the stereotypes. Lee provides us with a realistic record of Chinese immigrants' protests for civil rights. In the last part of Chapter 4, I will examine David Henry Hwang's play *Trying to Find Chinatown*, which raises questions about the origins of the stereotypes against Chinese Americans and seeks to redefine Chinese American identity. This chapter ends with a scrutiny of Li-Young Lee's memoir *The Winged Seed*, which reveals the

mixed and unstable nature of migrant identity. It provides us with an interesting redefinition of Chinese migrant identity.

#### 4.1. The stereotypical images of early Chinese immigrants in George Grantham Bain's photographs and Mary Tape's counter-stereotypical photographs at the turn of the twentieth century

In this part, I will compare the depiction of early Chinese immigrants in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century from the contrasting perspectives of George Grantham Bain's news photograph agency and Mary Tape, a Chinese migrant amateur photographer and civil rights activist. Bain's photographs mirrored the American public media's stereotypical perception of Chinese immigrants, according to which they were different, alien, inferior, and unassimilable. Yet Mary Tape's photographs of her family refuted those stereotypes. Her photographs and her endeavor to enroll Chinese migrant students in American public schools prove Tape's belief that Chinese immigrants were Americans and should enjoy the same rights and respect as other white Americans.

Let me begin from George Grantham Bain's photographs of Chinese immigrants in the 1910s and 1920s in the New York Chinatown. In Chapter 2, I discussed Bain's life and some of the photographs of the New York Chinatown produced by the George Bain News Service. In this section, I would like specifically to discuss his representation of Chinese immigrants. As "the father of news snapshot," Bain's news photograph service was the first syndicate for news photography in American history (Little 125). Thus, Bain's photographs were directly involved in mirroring and responding to his public's views of Chinese immigrants. Bain's images were often distorted and biased. B. Schrieke sorts out a long list of phrases for describing Chinese immigrants in California public media in the late nineteenth century:

The Chinese were now "a distinct people," "unassimilable," "keeping to their own customs and laws." They "did not settle in America"; they "carried back gold to their

homes”; they “went back to China.” Their mere presence “lowered the plane of living;” they “shut out of the white labour.” They were “clannish,” “dangerous”..., “criminal,” ... “debased and servile,” “deceitful and vicious,” “inferior from a mental and moral point of view,” They “smuggled opium” and “spread the use of it,” and their Chinatowns were “full of prostitution and gambling”. They were “filthy and loathsome in their habits” ... (11)

This passage mentions just some of the most representative details from Schrieke’s list. Still, they give us a clear idea of the the biased views leveled against Chinese immigrants at that time. First, they were referred to as Chinese, not Chinese American. This means that Chinese immigrants were not considered as citizens and would never be in the future. Also, most of the expressions are negative and hostile. In general, the Chinese immigrants were depicted as alien, inferior, dangerous, and unassimilable; they were sojourners who did not intend to settle down in America and become citizens; their presence would pollute American culture and society. These negative views evidently reflect the effects of the anti-Chinese laws in America in the late nineteenth century, especially the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. In the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, these potential immigrants were referred to as “Chinese”, not “Chinese Americans” or “Chinese immigrants” and did not have any chance of becoming American citizens. Thus, the above negative depictions of Chinese immigrants could be a result of those anti-Chinese laws.

As a successful businessman in the newspaper industry, George Grantham Bain understood the mindset of his customers. Correspondingly Bain produced and sent photographs to meet the expectations of the newspapers which had subscribed to his news photograph service. Michael Carlebach remarks, “If there had been a market for such pictures, Bain would have catered to it, regardless of his personal views. That, after all, was his business” (xxix). Immigration was such a hot topic at the turn of the century that many newspapers reported about Chinese immigrants’ lives and impact on American society. Of course, Bain took advantage of this opportunity to boost his business. His photographs covered the issue of immigration from many perspectives, “from the dismal processing stations on Ellis Island to the noisy, crowded neighborhoods on the

lower east side of Manhattan where many of the new arrivals ended up” (Carlebach xxvii). Anything the media thought was significant stirred Bain to send his photographers to the site. Since “the Chinese” were often “the focus of the existing prejudice against foreigners” at that time, the Chinese immigrants in the New York Chinatown became a frequent subject in Bain’s news photographs (Schrieke 12).

On the other hand, the beginning of the twentieth century marked a golden time for journalism in America. Newspapers and magazines “grew rapidly and reached an unprecedented number of readers, becoming in the process immensely powerful and persuasive institutions” (Carlebach vii). Their coverage of Chinese immigrants directly influenced how Americans viewed this ethnic group. Beyond that, the photographs from the George Bain News Service provided an interesting body of visual evidence and enhanced the credibility of the reportage that appeared in the newspapers and magazines. Over fifty newspapers in America subscribed to Bain’s photograph service (Little 129). This means “nearly every magazine and newspaper of major status” in America used Bain’s photographs (Hales 403). Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to say that Bain’s photographs of the Chinese immigrants in the New York Chinatown helped mold the American public’s perception of Chinese immigrants.

Because of the large demands from so many newspapers and magazines, it was impossible for Bain to take all the photographs by himself. Bain hired and trained a team of photographers to meet the demand, and his News Service took the credit for their work (Carlebach xix-xx). Whenever an order came in or significant events occurred, Bain sent out his photographers to the scenes with “exact instructions” (Little 130). In this way, the George Bain News Service built a complete and highly efficient system of producing, collecting, distributing, and publishing news photographs. In the process, photographs were no longer artistic representation. They became a commercial product that brought Bain a considerable profit. For this reason, Bain’s attention was entirely focused on how to meet the demands of the newspapers and magazines.

It is this commercial process that led Bain's photographers to take snapshots of the Chinese immigrants in New York Chinatown. The American media's curiosity about this unfamiliar minority group stirred Bain to feed this need. Whether those photographs were biased or stereotypical was not Bain's concern. The captions printed for those photographs are often vague and even misleading. That is to say, Bain's photographers did not really understand the Chinese immigrants or their culture as captured in the photographs. All they did was to follow Bain's instructions. Cultural anthropologist Francis L. K. Hsu believes that ignorance of Chinese immigrants produced the prejudice and stereotypes (Tsai 57). We find proof of this idea in the photographs of Chinese immigrants in New York Chinatown taken by Bain's photographers.

The photograph "New Year's Day in Chinatown, N.Y.C." (Figure 30) shows a Chinese migrant family in a heavily decorated room. The caption printed on the right side tells the viewer that this picture was taken during New Year's holiday in Chinatown. We are not sure if the "New Year" here means January 1st in Western calendar or New Year in the Chinese Lunar calendar, which is perhaps more likely. Also the "Chinatown" in the caption is so broad that it fails to specify the kind of room presented in the photograph, not to mention the characters and the meaning of the scene. This rather vague caption suggests that the photographer did not really understand the significance of these interior decorations or the Chinese custom of celebrating their New Year. Or maybe the photographer did not bother to understand them at all, since this picture was taken only to meet a photo order for Bain's News Service. When we take a closer look at the objects and people in this photograph, we see the perspective and emphasis of this photographer.

In the center of this image, the four immigrants wearing traditional Chinese clothes are possibly a family. The quality of their clothing indicates that this is a relatively wealthy merchant family. The delicate patterns on the fine silk jackets and pants of the children and mother suggest that they are wearing their very best (and maybe even brand new) clothes for celebrating the





Figure 30. Bain News Service. "New Year's Day in Chinatown, N.Y.C.". 1912. Negative glass. Library of Congress.

New Year. In addition, they also are wearing shiny headdresses, probably made of silver and jewels. The mother and two girls are looking up at the father, who is dressed in a black silk jacket and hat. He is extending his hand to his daughter, perhaps to give her a New Year's gift. However, their expressions are rather stolid. We do not see any traces of excitement on their faces, as we would expect. Thus, it is very likely that the whole scene was deliberately choreographed by Bain's photographer.

The posture of the four Chinese immigrants in this photograph is meaningful as well. The father stands tall and looking downward, while his wife and children are all looking up at him. The father's patriarchal dignity and the respect and obedience paid him by the wife and children diagram the hierarchical relationship structuring this migrant family. It gives the viewer an

impression that Chinese immigrants are family oriented and have strict rules of civility at home. In her article “The Intimacies of Four Continents,” Lisa Lowe also notices the British perception of Chinese as free laborers when she is researching the colonization history of the West Indies. Lowe points out that “this fantasy of Chinese family civility was a way of marking a racial difference between ‘Chinese free labor’ and ‘Negro slaves,’ through imagining the Chinese as closer to liberal ideas of human person and society” (“The Intimacies” 195). This idea of taking Chinese as obedient free labor permeated in the Western world. By casting Chinese immigrants as a civil and disciplined ethnic minority, this photograph implies that, unlike other more unruly ethnic groups, Chinese immigrants have the potential to become trustworthy laborers just as how they posed successfully for the photographer. Yet ironically, these trustworthy and obedient migrant workers were barred from entering America according to the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act.

Apart from the people in this photograph, the room is richly decorated in Chinese fashion. In the center behind the four people is an altar dedicated to a Chinese god. A plate of fruit, an incense burner, flowers and long incense sticks are placed before the portrait of the Chinese God of Longevity. A pair of couplets written in Chinese calligraphy hang along the sides of the portrait. Three flowery curtains drop from the ceiling and circle the three sides of the room. The furniture is all Chinese style. A half-full glass shelf can be seen in the foreground, to the left, which suggests that this room opens on a storefront. However, the photographer gives us no information about what kind of store it might be.

In fact, all the details in the photograph seem to serve the purpose of suggesting how thoroughly Chinese these immigrants are. Their clothing, hairstyle, decorations, and festive customs all helped to tell the American viewers that these Chinese immigrants were completely different and curiously exotic. Unfortunately, the photographer did not bother to tell the viewers more about the people in this photograph — something about their personality, occupation, or

lives. As a result, their real lives remain more hidden behind the door curtain than revealed. All the viewer sees is a stereotypical image of Chinese immigrants, the kind that fed the curiosity of the American viewer.

The next photograph, “Chinatown, New York City - Altar in Joss House, 1911” (Figure 31), chooses another angle to show how alien Chinese immigrant culture is. The caption printed on the photograph — “ALTAR IN JOSS HOUSE, CHINATOWN” — indicates the setting. Again, the interior of this house is heavily decorated in Chinese style. In the center of the picture, we find a table full of tributes to the Chinese god: fruit, candies, incense sticks and so forth. The flowery pattern on the table cloth creates a unique type of Oriental beauty. Behind the table of tributes, two bonsai trees stand on the sides of a statue of a Chinese god. Since we do not have a clear image of it, we cannot be sure which god it is. Three garlands of artificial flowers hang from the ceiling with a light in the center. In the foreground, a man in Western clothes is kneeling on the ground and bowing to the altar. Clearly, the photographer intended to show how a Chinese immigrant worshipped his god in a joss house in Chinatown. The odd feature in the photograph is the immigrant’s Western clothes and the Chinese god in front of him. Perhaps, the photographer wished to say that although Chinese immigrants may adopt our clothes and look like Americans, they would never give up their gods. Beyond that, this Chinese immigrant is bowing without his head to be seen in the photograph. The headless and faceless image erases his identity as an individual. The lighting in this photograph also helps to create a mysterious atmosphere. The overexposed light above the altar reinforces the darkness in this room. The overexposed parts on the man’s back, the two incense cans, and the bonsai on the right imply that the photographer may have used a flashlight to brighten up the dark interior. All these light effects enhance the stereotypical perception of Chinese immigrants and their culture as secretive, unknown, and exotic.



Figure 31. Bain News Service. "Chinatown, New York City - Altar in Joss House, 1911". 1911. Photographic print. Library of Congress.

To sum up, the photographs of George Grantham Bain's Chinese immigrants catered to and reinforced American viewers' stereotypes of them as alien and incapable of assimilation. Even though some Chinese immigrants adapted Western clothes, their preservation of Chinese habits, customs, and religion revealed that their main allegiance was to China. This helped to justify the mainstream hostility toward them. The negative propaganda aimed at them intensified the

discrimination and responded to the anti-Chinese immigration laws such as the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and the 1892 Geary Act.

Of course, Chinese immigrants started their fight for equal rights as soon as the anti-Chinese legislation took hold. Many turned to American courts to demand their rights. “They brought criminal actions against elected officials — mayors, police chiefs, members of boards of supervisors. They forged unprecedented lawsuits for police harassment and intimidation. They created early forms of class actions. They demanded public education for their children. They fought the queue, the shoulder-pole, the laundry, and the cubic-air ordinances” (Pfaelzer 246). According to Jean Pfaelzer’s record, Chinese immigrants in America “filed more than seven thousand suits in the first decade following the Chinese Exclusion Act, and they won the vast majority of them” (248). They had learned to use the American legal system to protect their rights and challenge the stereotypes of them.

Among the many discriminatory laws against Chinese immigrants, public education was one of the most contested issues. There is a long legislative history of segregating and excluding Chinese immigrants from public education. As early as 1860, the California legislature passed the California School Law, which prohibited the public school from admitting “Negroes, Mongolians and Indians”; “the trustees of any district may establish a separate school for the education of Negroes, Mongolians and Indians, and use the public school funds for the support of the same” (Kuo 190). At that time, Chinese and other Asian immigrants were all included in the category of Mongolians. This law started a long history of providing segregated education for Chinese immigrants. It was also a response to the anti-Chinese propaganda dominating the American media in the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1858, *S.F. Evening Bull* published an article titled “The Public School and Colored Children”, which protested:

let us keep our public schools free from the intrusion of the inferior races. If we are compelled to have Negroes and Chinamen among us, it is better, of course, that they should be educated. But teach them separately from our own children.

Let us preserve our Caucasian blood pure. We want no mongrel race of moral and mental hybrids to people the mountains and valleys of California. (Kuo 190)

This article expressed the sentiment that the “morally and mentally inferior” Chinese immigrants would debase the public education for white Americans. Thus, it was necessary to open separate schools for Chinese migrant students.

However, the 1860 California School Law did not quell the anti-Chinese revolts over segregation in the public schools. Racist leaders wanted to banish Chinese immigrants completely from the public school system, including the segregated schools. San Francisco’s *Daily Morning Call* described the danger of providing public school education to Chinese immigrants in the following terms: “The [Chinese] race is striving to take root in the soil. They desire or profess to desire, to mingle their youth with ours, with a view, doubtless, to more thorough assimilation in the body politic” (Low 57). These racists believed that well-educated Chinese immigrants would infiltrate the American political system and eventually control the country. So the best way to prevent this from happening was to take away their access to a public school education. As a result, in 1870, the Legislature revised the 1860 California School Law to read as follows “The education of children of African descent, and Indian children, shall be provided for in separate schools” (Kuo 192). The word “Mongolians” was removed from the earlier law so that Chinese immigrants were excluded entirely from public schools, including separate schools, from 1871 to 1885 (Johnson, “Mary” 731).

The Chinese community in America was stirred to anger over these discriminatory laws, since many poor Chinese American children lost access to a public school education. Others in better economic conditions hired tutors, “were homeschooled, or attended religious schools” (Johnson, “Mary” 731). At the same time, Chinese immigrants did not give up fighting for their rights. In California, they petitioned the School Board and State Legislature to admit their children to public schools and argued that “they were being taxed without receiving any

benefits of a public school education” (Kuo 194). Nonetheless, their petitions were either defeated or ignored. In 1878, “thirteen hundred Chinese residents of San Francisco, Sacramento, and other towns” petitioned the California state legislature “on behalf of the three thousand Chinese children residing in California”, declaring that “Chinese merchants and laborers ... being under the protection of your Constitution and laws, are entitled to the same rights and privileges accorded to foreigners generally” (Ngai 49). Beyond that, since they had “paid more than \$40,000 a year in taxes to the state,” it was “unjust” to exclude Chinese students from public education (Ngai 49). Regrettably, Chinese immigrants’ united petition was disregarded by the state legislature yet again.

The year 1885 was a turning point in the history of Chinese immigrants in America. In that year, Mary McGladery Tape (1857-1934), a female Chinese immigrant, eventually regained the right to attend public schools in the famous case *Tape v. Hurley*. On January 9, 1885, judge James Maguire of the Superior Court of the city and county of San Francisco supported Mary Tape’s petition and made “one of the most important civil rights decisions in American history”: “To deny a child, born of Chinese parents in this state, entrance to the public schools would be a violation of the law of the state and the Constitution of the United States” (Pfaelzer 266-67). After this decision, separate public schools for Chinese immigrants were established in San Francisco. Mary Tape became a well-known civil rights activist in the Chinese community of San Francisco after her successful legal battle.

The life of Mary Tape and her family are most extraordinary. She was raised in “an orphanage in Shanghai” and brought to the United States by “some missionaries when she was 11 years old” (Chi 106). In August 1868, she arrived in San Francisco and unfortunately found herself in a Chinatown brothel (Tepper 20). Five months later, she was rescued by the Protestant missionaries from the Ladies’ Relief Society who would teach her the English language and American manners (Gamble 12). During her five years’ stay there, the assistant matron Mary

McGladery took special care of Mary Tape. She taught her “not only to read but also to play the piano and to draw” (Ngai 20). Growing up in this all-white environment, Mary Tape aspired to become a Westernized American at the expense of her Chinese past. As an act of showing her thanks to the assistant matron, she took the name “Mary McGladery” as her American name, while her Chinese name remains unknown until today.

Mary Tape met her future husband Joseph Tape (1852-1935) in the spring of 1875 (Ngai 1). Joseph was also a Chinese immigrant who arrived in California in 1864 (Ngai 4). His original Chinese name was Jeu Dip in Cantonese and 赵洽 in Chinese characters (Ngai viii and 232). He was “the interpreter to the Imperial Consulate of China” in San Francisco and was “also engaged in the express business, having a monopoly of transporting the Chinese who come here in bond, besides handling large contracts for wholesale merchants in Chinatown” (Gamble 12). As a go-between for Chinese immigrants and American companies, Jeu Dip had also adopted American dress and an American life-style. When he met Mary Tape, “they found in each other not just another Chinese person, but something far more rare and new: another Chinese American” (Ngai 1). Their shared aim of becoming American brought them together. Six months later, they held their wedding at the First Presbyterian Church, which was an unusual place for Chinese immigrants to have their weddings at that time in San Francisco (Ngai 24). Reverend Loomis, “who had rescued Mary” from the brothel in Chinatown, performed “a Christian ceremony for the couple” (Ngai 24). To match his wife’s name, “Mary”, and complete the couple’s Christian identity, Jeu Dip changed his name to “Joseph” and took the German name “Tape”, which sounded like “Dip” (Ngai 24). This marriage marked the beginning of the Tape family’s American dream.

Mary and Joseph Tape had four children, Mamie (1876-1974), Frank (1878-1950), Emily (1880-1934), Gertrude (1890-1947). All four were delivered by white doctors and nurses, not by Chinese midwives, which was the custom for most Chinese immigrants (Ngai 25). From birth



the children were dressed in American clothes and played with the white children in the same neighborhood (Ngai 40). English was “the primary language” in their household (Ngai 40). The husband and wife both dressed and lived as Americans did. Joseph adopted the hobby of hunting, while Mary loved painting and photography. In their leisure time in the summer, they toured California on the Southern Pacific Railroad or by privately owned car (Ngai 31). Once, they were asked “whether they ever expected to go back to China again, Mrs. Tape answered: ‘it will only be as tourists visiting a foreign country. California is our home’” (Gamble 12). These details in their life suggest that the Tapes were very determined to live like other Americans. In the process China had become a foreign country to them.

However, the Tapes’ road to integration was not smooth. In 1884, Mary Tape intended to enroll her first child Mamie in the all-white Spring Valley Primary School in San Francisco. But the child was refused by the principal Jennie Hurley, because Mamie was of Chinese descent. The school authorities believed that “the association of Chinese and white children would be very demoralizing mentally and morally to the latter” (Low 22). Mary Tape did not give in to the principal’s decision. She asked the Imperial Chinese Consulate in San Francisco for help. The consul wrote to the Superintendent of Spring Valley Primary School, Andrew Jackson Moulder, pointing out that denying Mamie’s admittance to the school was “inconsistent with the treatises, constitutions and laws of the United States, especially so in this case as the child is native-born” (Kuo 196-97). He requested Andrew Jackson Moulder to “admit the child and all other Chinese children resident here who desire to enter the public schools” (Kuo 196-97). After receiving the letter, the school obtained support from the State Superintendent William Welcher, who claimed that “the California Constitution had called the Chinese ‘dangerous to the well-being of the state’” (Kuo 197). So the school upheld its decision to refuse Mary Tape’s daughter access to the school.

Even so, Mary Tape refused to accept this discriminatory decision. This time she and her husband hired “a lawyer, William Gibson, to sue” the principal of the Spring Valley Primary School Jennie Hurley and the Board of Education on Mamie’s behalf (Ngai 51). This was the groundbreaking case *Tape v. Hurley* in 1884. The judge Sharpstein pointed out that “the main question in this case is whether a child ‘between six and twenty-one years of age, of Chinese parentage, but who was born and has always lived in the city and county of San Francisco,’ is entitled to admission in the public school of the district in which she resides” (Chi 107). Mary Tape’s lawyer Gibson argued that “excluding Mamie Tape violated both California’s 1880 school law and the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which guaranteed the rights of equal protection and due process to all persons”, including Chinese immigrants (Ngai 52). Therefore, Mamie, who fulfilled the residency and the citizenship requirements, should have the same rights as other Americans to public education. Joseph Tape added in the court that their daughter was no different from other white American children, neither were the couple themselves:

Fifteen years ago I discarded my queue, and have never since worn one. My wife and I are now, and for fifteen years past, have been clothed in the American costume. The said Mamie Tape is now and always has been dressed in the American costume, in the manner common and usual for a child of her years. ...the said Mamie Tape is not a child of filthy or vicious habits, or suffering from any contagious or infectious disease. (Ngai 52)

As a result, it was unreasonable and illegal to bar Mamie from attending the Spring Valley Primary School.

On January 9th, 1885, the California Supreme Court supported Superior Court Justice McGuire’s decision in favor of the Tapes. McGuire declared that “to deny a child, born of Chinese parents in this state, entrance to the public schools would be a violation of the law of the state and the Constitution of the United States” (Phu 40). In addition:

Children between six and twenty-one years of age, of Chinese parentage, who were born and have always lived in the city and county of San Francisco, are

entitled to admission into the public school of the district in which they reside. And teachers are not justified in excluding them, notwithstanding a resolution of the Board of Education purports to command them so to do. (Chi 108)

This was a big victory for the Tapes and for the Chinese community in San Francisco as well. It meant that all Chinese American children were able to enroll in public schools, at least in San Francisco.

Unfortunately, this was not yet a happy ending for the Tapes. On April 7th, 1885, Mamie Tape was again denied admission to Spring Valley Primary School when she tried to enroll in the school a second time. “The excuse this time was that the child had no certificate of vaccination and that the classes were full to capacity” (Thompson “Part”). At the same time, the Spring Valley Primary School and the San Francisco Board of Education conspired together and rushed to open a new Chinese school for Chinese immigrants. The school superintendent of Spring Valley Andrew Jackson Moulder “lobbied a compliant state legislature to introduce Assembly Bill 268, which was passed under an ‘urgency provision’” (Thompson “Part”). It declared that “when such separate schools are established Chinese or Mongolian children must not be admitted into any other schools” (Thompson “Part”). Therefore, the newly opened Chinese school in San Francisco left the Tapes no choice but to give up the idea of enrolling their children in the all-white Spring Valley Primary School.

After hearing the news about the discriminative Assembly Bill 268, Mary Tape was furious and wrote a letter to the Board of Education on April 8, 1885. It was published in *Alta* on April 16. In this letter, she argued that it was unjust to deny a Chinese immigrant’s rights to public education. She wrote: “Dear sirs, Will you please to tell me! Is it a disgrace to be Born a Chinese? Didn't God make us all!!! What right have you to bar my children out of the school because she is a chinese Decend”<sup>8</sup> (Tape 17). By referring to God and Christianity, Tape tried to

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<sup>8</sup> I have kept Mary Tape’s original spelling and capitalization. Although they are not grammatically correct, they still present her courage and determination to strive for equal rights for her children and other Chinese immigrants.

defend the equal rights of Chinese American children. It also reflects the assimilation of the Tapes' family. Then, she cited evidence showing that her children were the same as other Americans, except their Chinese origin: "My children don't dress like the other Chinese. They look just as phunny amongst them as the Chinese dress in Chinese look amongst you Caucasians. ... Her playmates is all Caucasians ever since she could toddle around. If she is good enough to play with them! Then is she not good enough to be in the same room and Studie with them" (Tape 17). Although Mary Tape vowed that her daughter would "never attend any of the Chinese schools" (17), on April 13, the opening day of the new Chinese school, Mamie Tape and her brother Frank Tape were its first students (Chi 106). The Tapes had to accept the reality that even though they had won the case, they were still not treated equally as other white Americans.

Besides being a civil rights activist, Mary Tape was also a woman of many talents. She was an amateur painter, telegrapher, and photographer (Gamble 12). As I mentioned above, Chinese immigrants learned to use cameras "by the end of the Nineteenth Century" on the Pacific coast (Phu 40). In San Francisco, Chinese immigrants opened many photography studios; for example, "Shew's Pioneer Gallery, 523 Kearny Street; Fong Get Photo Studio, 914 Stockton; and the W. F. Song Studio, 800 Washington Street" (Phu 41). However, it was unusual for a female Chinese immigrant to master so many skills at that time. Mary Tape had broken the stereotypical image of a docile and submissive Chinese housewife.

Mary Tape revealed that she learned photography from "reading different authorities on the subjects and then studying the methods to see which was the best" (Gamble 12). In addition to books, she had been "working with Wong Hong Tai, a retired watchmaker who lived on Washington Street and was also an amateur inventor, photographer, and telegraphist" (Ngai 63). According to Mae Ngai, "their principal collaboration was in photography. Wong built cameras with increasingly fast shutter speeds, while Mary made dry plates with faster exposures" (63). Photographic historian Daniella Thompson notes that Mary's extra sensitive dry plates were

capable of capturing “trotters in motion and birds in flight”. It was extremely rare for amateur photographers to produce their own plates at the end of the nineteenth century. Thus, “when the California Camera Club was formed in 1891”, Mary Tape immediately became a member (Ngai 64). She actively attended the lectures, workshops, and the annual shows at the California Camera Club (Ngai 64). In addition to her skills in making dry prints, she continued to study “how to make magic lantern slides —glass slides to which a positive image was transferred and then projected onto a blank wall or screen” (Ngai 64). Her accomplishment in photography brought her several diplomas from “the Mechanics’ Institute, which gave her the highest award for amateur photography” (Gamble 12).

Mary Tape’s fame and remarkable skills in photography led members of the news media to visit her and report on her life. In November 1892, reporter Leland Gamble from *The Morning Call* visited the Tapes and wrote about what he discovered. Gamble was very impressed with Mary Tape’s photographs, which were “fully equal to any amateur in the State” and even bore “comparison with many professionals” (12). Mary’s photographs were not the only part that surprised Gamble. He was amazed by so many other aspects about her family.

First, all the family members were dressed in American clothes. Then, every child was proficient in an art form: the eldest daughter Mamie played piano, the second daughter Emily danced very well, and Frank, the only boy, played French horn (Gamble 12). Also, everyone spoke “the best of English, and with a refined accent” (Gamble 12). So in his eyes, this family showed very good taste and “everything in the room bore the unmistakable signs of refinement and had nothing to make any one believe it the home of a Chinese family” (Gamble 12). His amazement reflected the public media’s deep-rooted stereotypes about Chinese immigrants. Yet what Gamble saw in the Tapes’ house was “thoroughly American” (12). He confessed that he used to look at Chinese immigrants in a stereotypical way: “I had always been accustomed to view the Chinese in an entirely different light; but when I saw around me the father and mother

and their accomplished children I changed my opinion in regard to the race in general and saw that with proper instruction before they had become imbued with national traits they were susceptible of civilization as any nation in the world” (Gamble 12). Nonetheless, in his excited words, we still observe his belief in the superiority of American civilization. The Tapes were “instructed” by the American civilization so that they were elevated to a higher level than other Chinese immigrants who did not go through this process. In other words, Chinese immigrants and their own culture were innately inferior.

There is another detail that merits our attention in this news report about the Tapes. The reporter Leland Gamble visited the Tapes and wrote about his visit after the prominent *Tape v. Hurley* case and the publication of Mary Tape’s letter to the Board of Education in the *Alta* newspaper. Yet, Gamble did not say a word about them in his article. Clearly, he did not agree with Mary Tape’s challenge to the American legal system. All his thoughts were focused on the fact that a female Chinese immigrant was able to master such a complicated and artistic technique like photography.

As a photographer, Mary Tape’s focus was not on the exotic qualities of Chinese life favored by American photographers. In her photographs, there is hardly any portrayal of the mysterious Chinatown streets or Chinese immigrants in traditional clothes. Instead, her photographs highlight Chinese immigrants’ integration into American culture and society. The subjects of her photographs include portraits of her family, family trips to the California countryside, “still lives, and landscape” (Ressler 336). “Although she took hundreds of photographs, only a few survive” and are preserved in her descendants’ family albums (Ngai x and 64). If we compare Mary Tape’s photographs with those of George Grantham Bain, the major distinction between the two is that Bain’s photographs show how different Chinese immigrants were from Americans, while Tape tried to suggest that they were actually the same.



Figure 32. Mary Tape. "Untitled". c. 1890s. Jack G. Kim Collection. Phu, Thy. *Picturing Model Citizens: Civility in Asian American Visual Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2012. Print. Page 42.



Figure 33. Mary Tape. "Untitled". c. 1890s. Jack G. Kim Collection. Phu, Thy. *Picturing Model Citizens: Civility in Asian American Visual Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2012. Print. Page 42.

Figure 32 and 33 show Mary Tape's children playing with white children. In Figure 32, the tall girl is Mamie Tape, and the short one is Gertrude Tape. Mamie stands with her back to the camera. She holds fruit behind the back. Perhaps she is asking her white American friend to guess what she has in her hands. Gertrude turns halfway to the camera. She is probably eating fruit. Everyone is dressed in an American-style white gown and they all act naturally in front of the camera. These details contrast with the photographs from George Grantham Bain's collection which emphasizes the Chinese clothes and decorations. The expressions of Bain's Chinese immigrants also look numb and empty, since they were taking instructions from the photographer in how to pose in front of the camera.

Figure 33 is another photograph of Gertrude playing with her white American friend Mabel Marriot (Ngai page of photographs). Both girls wear Victorian style dress. Gertrude points her finger at the doll under Mabel's arm. Maybe they are discussing how to play with this doll. This also suggests that little Gertrude was already familiar with American toy and games. Neither of them look at the camera, rather they are absorbed in their own game. The children's unaffected actions in these two photographs reveal their intimate relationship to the photographer, Mary Tape (Phu, *Picturing* 41). The presentation of her own daughters playing with American children supports Mary Tape's argument that her children were just like any other Americans. They dressed and played in the same way as American children.

According to Mae Ngai, of Mary Tape's children rarely played with other Chinese American children (photograph page). One of the main reasons is that the Tapes did not live in Chinatown but in an American neighborhood. However, we still find one photograph of Gertrude Tape with a Chinese migrant girl in San Francisco Chinatown. In Figure 34, Gertrude Tape is walking side by side with a Chinese American girl. Gertrude's dark Victorian dress on the left contrasts with the other girl's Chinese outfit. Gertrude carries a bouquet of flowers and looks straight at the camera, while the girl on the right wears a delicate Chinese headdress and looks





Figure 34. Mary Tape. "Untitled". 1894. Jack G. Kim Collection. Ngai, Mae. *The Lucky Ones: One Family and the Extraordinary Invention of Chinese America*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010. Print. Photograph page.

downward. No doubt, Gertrude is more comfortable with camera than her friend. Mae Ngai notes that this photograph was shot "on Clay Avenue, behind the Chinese Presbyterian Church" in Chinatown (photograph page). It is possible that they just left the church in their Sunday finest. Another interesting fact about this photograph is that it is the "only extant photograph" that Mary Tape took on the streets of Chinatown (Ngai 65). Most of her photographs were set in either their houses outside Chinatown or other parts of California, during their family trips. We can assume that the Tapes did not want to mingle with the Chinese immigrants in Chinatown. Rather they had opted to live as Americans.

The photograph titled "On Our Porch at Camp Meeker" (Figure 35) offers a scene of the Tapes' summer life. The Tapes are relaxing on the porch of their summer home in Camp Meeker





Figure 35. Mary Tape. “On Our Porch at Camp Meeker”. c. 1905. Jack G. Kim Collection. Ngai, Mae. *The Lucky Ones: One Family and the Extraordinary Invention of Chinese America*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010. Print. Photograph page.

in Sonoma County (Ngai photograph page). In the left foreground, Gertrude Tape is reading in the rocker. Emily Tape is standing behind her son Frank Park on the right. Emily’s husband, Robert Frank, is sitting on the porch railing. Mary Tape’s husband, Joseph, is sitting in the rocker next to Robert. Everyone in the photograph is wearing American clothes and seems at ease, as one would while on a summer vacation. This photograph only records one of their many family summer vacations at their several properties in California, one being the family ranch in Hayward and the 640-acre hunting field in Ukiah (Thompson “Part”).

When they were not on vacation, the Tapes resided on Russell Street in suburban Berkeley “from the mid-1890s until the early 1970s. During that time, they owned no fewer than five properties on the 2100 block of Russell” (Thompson “Part”). Evidently, the Tapes were rich enough to stay away from the crowded and rough Chinatown in San Francisco. Although it is arguable whether they distanced themselves intentionally from the poorer Chinese community,

there can be no doubt about their determination to blend into American society. In Ngai's opinion, Mary Tape's decision to live outside Chinatown "was not an elitist or ambitious rejection of the Chinese community; it was imposed on her by the circumstances of her own experience" (55). On the one hand, she definitely wanted to forget her traumatic past in the Chinatown brothel. On the other hand, after being rescued by the white missionaries, she was brought up in a white American environment since her rescue. Except for the fact that she looked Chinese, it was difficult for her to identify with her fellow immigrants and their culture in Chinatown.

For this reason, the Tapes cannot be said to represent the majority of the Chinese immigrants who lived a hard life in and around Chinatown. Mae Ngai called the Tapes the "in-betweens and go-betweens, individuals who found in their bilingualism and biculturalism opportunities for economic and social advancement", the "archetypal members of the first Chinese American middle class" (ix). The Tapes' economic success was based on their connections to both the Chinese community and white American society. Working as an interpreter for Chinese community and managing the transportation of Chinese immigrants and goods to America, Joseph Tape had laid a solid economic foundation for his family. His linguistic abilities and familiarity with American society enabled Joseph to establish a link between the Chinese community and American society. He and his family benefited greatly from this intercultural role.

Nonetheless, throughout their lives, from their American lifestyle to their involvement in the case *Tape v. Hurley*, they tried hard to prove to others that they were Americans, not Chinese. This will to deny their Chinese origin and culture reflects their wish to identify with the white American society, including the negative stereotyping of Chinese immigrants. They distanced themselves from the Chinese immigrants in Chinatown, because they accepted the racist perception that Chinese immigrants and culture were inferior. In Mae Ngai's words, the Tapes

“broke into the American middle class by helping manage the continued marginalization of other Chinese” (223). However, no matter how well they were assimilated, the Tapes still could not escape the fate of being haunted by acts of discrimination against Chinese immigrants, due to the color of their skin and their oriental features. Their children eventually did not attend the all-white Spring Valley Primary School. In short, Chinese immigrants like the Tapes were trapped in a self-contradictory dilemma. They wished to be Americanized and erase their Chinese past, while the prejudice against their Chinese ancestry, in the end, pulled them back to the Chinese community from which they escaped. This explains why Mary Tape argued that her daughter was American and not Chinese. But at the same time she protested against the unequal treatment of Chinese immigrants.

Still, it is undeniable that Mary Tape contributed tremendously to the civil rights of Chinese immigrants. Her fight for justice and equal rights in the sphere of public education had brought about an important change to the Chinese community. Although her children were prevented from enrolling in the Spring Valley Primary School, her demand for them to be educated like other American children led to the creation of the first Chinese public school. After that, more Chinese American children “left the alternative schools and began to attend the public school. By 1923, there was an average daily attendance of more than nine hundred students in the public school” (Kuo 200). In the era of segregation, the case *Tape v. Hurley* gave Chinese immigrants an opportunity to voice their anger and challenge the discriminatory practices of American society. Yet, on the other hand, this case was not able to bring down the wall of segregation. What was worse, “for the next twenty-five years, those who advocated segregation in San Francisco would quote” the case *Tape v. Hurley* and the “amendment as the justification for preventing Chinese children from going to school with whites” (Low 68). It was not until the 1920s that desegregation began to take place in schools in San Francisco (“Primary” 17), and in 1954, the Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* ended the school segregation

ultimately nationwide (Johnson, “Mary” 731). For Chinese immigrants, this was only the beginning of their fight against stereotyping and discrimination.

#### 4.2. Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*: A Chinese American Girl’s Search for Identity and the Debates on Stereotypes

In the first part of this chapter, I have discussed a section of photographs from George Grantham Bain’s News Service and other negative stereotypes of Chinese immigrants. I have also focused on Mary Tape’s photographs in relation to such stereotypes and her contribution to Chinese immigrants’ rights to an equal education. In this section, I will move from the twentieth century to the mid-twentieth century and discuss a new phase in Chinese American history and this ethnic group’s battle against discrimination. I have chosen Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* as an exemplary narrative text of the period. The author recounts the story of a Chinese American girl’s search for identity and the debates on stereotyping which her book caused. I also choose to focus on this book because of its extraordinary influence on subsequent Chinese American literature. It also has an important effect on the Chinese American community, among feminists, and among American readers in general. According to Paul Skenazy, this book “is the most anthologized of any living American writer, and that she is read by more American college students than any other living author. Students, particularly, Asian American women, look to her as a model, find themselves in her tales, seek her out with sycophantic regularity” (vii). Donald C. Goellnicht even calls *The Woman Warrior* the “foundational text of contemporary Asian North American women's writing” (300). These appraisals are symptomatic of its significance and impact on shaping Chinese American identity in North America.

Maxine Hong Kingston is a second-generation Chinese American. Her father Tom Hong, a scholar and teacher in China, emigrated to America from Sun Woi(新会), near Canton, in 1925

(Huntley 1). However, due to the language and cultural barriers, he could only take menial jobs in the New York Chinatown (Huntley 2). After saving up enough money, he opened a laundry in Chinatown with four other Chinese immigrants (Huntley 2). In 1939, Tom Hong's wife in China Ying Lan Chew, a physician, arrived in New York and joined him (Huntley 2). Soon the couple moved to the small Chinatown in Stockton, California, to continue their laundry business (Huntley 2). Maxine was their first child in America. Their two children in China died before Ying Lan Chew emigrated. In addition to Maxine, the couple had five younger children (Huntley 2-3). This family history provides the materials for Maxine's first book, *The Woman Warrior*.

Maxine Hong Kingston published *The Woman Warrior* in 1976, in the middle of the struggle for civil rights among the nation's various ethnic groups. Since the 1960s when she was studying at Berkeley, Hong Kingston participated actively in the Free Speech movement and other student activist campaigns (Huntley 8). This experience influenced her understanding of Chinese American identity in the United States. She decided at the time that we should "leave out the hyphen in 'Chinese-American', because the hyphen gives the word on either side equal weight, as if linking two nouns. It looks as if a Chinese-American has double citizenship, ... Without the hyphen, 'Chinese' is an adjective and 'American' a noun; a Chinese American is a type of American" (Kingston, "Cultural" 60). This makes Chinese ethnics in America equal to other ethnic groups such as African Americans, native Americans, or Hispanic Americans. Her first book *The Woman Warrior* exemplifies her wish to justify Chinese Americans' entitlement to their proper identity.

In *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine Hong Kingston recounts a Chinese American girl's search for identity. The book is divided into five parts, which intertwine the narrator's retelling of her mother's stories and the narrator's growth. Part one, "No Name Woman", is about the narrator's aunt in China who killed herself and her baby after committing adultery while her husband was in America. Both her family and the village chose to forget about her because her adultery

brought shame to everyone. In the second part “White Tigers”, the narrator blends two heroic figures from old Chinese tales, Fa Mu Lan (花木兰) and Yue Fei (岳飞), to create a new swordswoman. This fictional heroine underwent years of martial arts training with a godlike old couple and eventually avenged her family and people. The third part, “Shaman”, is the life story of the narrator’s mother in China and America. It is based on the actual experiences of Maxine Hong Kingston’s mother Ying Lan Chew, especially her study days at the medical school and later career as a doctor in China. Kingston names the character “Brave Orchid”, which is the English translation of her mother’s Chinese name<sup>9</sup>. The fourth part, “At the Western Palace”, focuses on Brave Orchid’s sister, Moon Orchid. She was persuaded by Brave Orchid to fly from Hong Kong to join her husband in America. After she met her husband’s new wife and realized that she would never be able to live with him, she began to lose her mind and eventually died in a mental hospital. The last part, “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe”, tells the story of the young narrator’s life at home and school. It centers on the narrator’s desire to voice her struggle against the Chinese patriarchal convention and American stereotypes. The reconciliation between the narrator and her mother at the end symbolizes the completion of her Chinese American identity, which is both an inheritance of her Chinese ancestry and a development in the new environment.

There are two major issues in *The Woman Warrior* that I would like to discuss. One is the thematic thread of a Chinese American female’s exploration of her identity; the other concerns the debates around the stereotyping of Chinese ethnics in American. Since all the main characters in the book are female, this book provides a unique look at the theme of identity so central to multicultural debates at mid-century. In fact, Kingston wrote *The Woman Warrior* at the same time with its sequel *China Men* and planned to publish them together (Cheung, “The Woman” 126). Later, because she discovered that the men’s stories “undercut the feminist

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<sup>9</sup> In Chinese, “Ying Lan” writes as “英兰”. “英” means “Brave”, and “兰” means “Orchid”.

viewpoint” (Kim 209), she published the two books separately. She explains, “I care about men... as much as I care about women.... Given the present state of affairs, perhaps men’s and women’s experience have to be dealt with separately for now, until more auspicious times are with us” (Kim 209). In addition to problems of discrimination that all Chinese immigrants and ethnics encountered in this period, women in particular had to fight to win their rights and be able to speak for themselves, particularly against Chinese patriarchal conventions and the Western fantasy of Chinese women. On the other hand, except for the praise Kingston received for this book, there is also much criticism of the book for stereotyping Chinese immigrants, Chinese people in China, and Chinese culture. One of the loudest voices was that of Frank Chin. In his article “Come All Ye Asian American Writers”, Chin accuses Kingston of faking Chinese myths and mystifying Chinese Americans and Chinese people in order to cater to Americans’ stereotypes of Chinese ethnics. Kingston’s response and other critics’ comments provide a broader context in which to examine Chinese American writers’ connections to the practice of ethnic stereotyping.

Let us start from the first issue in Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, a Chinese American girl’s search for identity. One prerequisite for establishing identity is having a voice to speak for oneself and being heard. In his article “Literary Tricksterism: Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoir of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*”, Bonnie TuSmith remarks that for ethnic Americans, the “deprivation of speech (a direct result of racist laws) leads to a lack of personality and even the lack of will to live” (285). Without a voice of their own, some ethnic groups are often silenced and disoriented. Thus, it is essential for ethnic minorities to obtain their voice and reclaim their identity. In *The Woman Warrior*, the girl narrator is also troubled by the hyphenated status of her identity. She puzzles, “I could not figure out what was my village” (Kingston, *The Woman* 45). She does not know where she came from and how she becomes the person she is in the narrative. The cause for this is that her voice has been long



suppressed by two forces: one is the Chinese patriarchy and the other is American racial discrimination and marginalization. She has to overcome these two overwhelming factors in order to regain her voice.

The first form of subjugation comes from the structures of Chinese patriarchy. In old China, women were often considered inferior and had lower status than men. The most well-known rules for disciplining women are the Three Obediences and the Four Virtues (三从四德): “The Three Obediences enjoined a woman to obey her father before marriage, her husband after marriage, and her eldest son after her husband’s death. The Four Virtues decreed that she be chaste; her conversation courteous and not gossipy; her deportment graceful but not extravagant; her leisure spent in perfecting needlework and tapestry for beautifying the home” (Ling 3). People believed that these doctrines derived from Confucius’s ideas on constructing “a perfect, hierarchical Celestial Order” (Powers 95). As the smallest unit of society, the family should also reflect this hierarchical order. The purpose of the Three Obediences and the Four Virtues is to instruct women to labor loyally and submissively at home and never rebel. Breaking the Three Obediences and the Four Virtues could be a woman’s biggest crime.

In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston compares women in old China to “great sea snails—the corded wood, babies, and laundry they carried were the whorls on their backs” (10). Without any complaints, they carried the burden of the whole family on their backs without receiving any recognition. Not only that, they were often silenced and were not able to speak out against their hard lot. The No Name Woman in *The Woman Warrior* is a good example. When the villagers learn about her adultery, which brings great shame to the family and the whole village, they attack her house. However, we do not hear any protests from her. Later, even her own family joins in the attack. Unlike the villagers, her family adopts a crueler way, which is “deliberately forgetting her” after her suicide (Kingston, *The Woman* 16). No one dares to mention her name or tell her story to anyone. By taking away her name, her family and the villagers deny her

posthumous existence and identity. She is completely silenced after her unforgivable mistake.

The narrator's mother tells her this story to warn her not follow the No Name Woman's example:

"Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don't humiliate us. You wouldn't like to be forgotten as if you had never been born" (Kingston, *The Woman* 5). Although the family is not in China any more, this Chinese American girl still runs the risk of being silenced if she dares to break the Chinese conventions. In her words, "Even now China wraps double binds around my feet" (Kingston, *The Woman* 48).

In *The Woman Warrior*, Chinese immigrants brought their old patriarchal mentality to the new country. When they have babies, they prefer boys to girls. The narrator often hears her parents and other Chinese immigrants say that "Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds"; "There's no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls"; or "But then there's no use wasting all that discipline on a girl. 'When you raise girls, you're raising children for strangers'" (Kingston, *The Woman* 46). When a new boy is born, "The boy's parents and the old man bought him toys, bought him everything—new diapers, new plastic pants—not homemade diapers, not bread bags. They gave him a full-month party inviting all the emigrant villagers" (Kingston, *The Woman* 191); while a baby girl does not merit any special attention. Of course, there were reasons for the Chinese preference to boys in the past. When a girl got married, she left her own family and went to live with her husband's family. She could no longer take care of her own family any more. What is more, since the China before the 1980s was an agricultural society, farmers wanted sons who could help them with the work. Girls were less capable of laboring on the farms. And boys would take care of the family when their parents became old. In addition, boys would inherit and pass on the family names while girls had to adopt their father's surnames. However, in *The Woman Warrior* the narrator's mother does not give her any explanation as to why Chinese immigrants prefer boys. Nor does she have any chance to ask why. As a result, she too is silenced.

In order to free herself from the restrictions of Chinese patriarchal conventions, the girl narrator tries to gain her mother's attention and speak her mind. She makes a long list of things that she wants to tell her mother, for she believes that "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" (Kingston, *The Woman* 198). She desires to be heard, understood, and recognized. Another approach that the girl narrator uses to challenge the Chinese patriarchal conventions is to turn herself into a boy and an American. Working against the old Chinese belief that it is better for women to be ignorant and housewives at home (in Chinese 女子无才便是德), the narrator studies hard to get straight A's and enters college (Kingston, *The Woman* 47). She thinks that her "American successes" will prove her value to her mother, or in her words, being "worthy of eating the food" (Kingston, *The Woman* 52). Yet her grades and success in college do not win her mother's attention.

In addition to a difficult upbringing at home, the girl narrator finds that she is also silenced by American society. First, in the eyes of American racists, women of Chinese descent are silent and docile. This stereotypical perception of Chinese American women reinforces their conflicted position in the family. In *The Woman Warrior*, the girl narrator notices that "Normal Chinese women's voices are strong and bossy. We American-Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves American-feminine. Apparently we whispered even more softly than the Americans" (Kingston 172). According to the American racial prejudices, these Chinese American girls have to whisper if they hope to be accepted in the mainstream society, even though they have strong and loud voices. Thus, when the racist "urban developers and city planners ... tear down her parents' laundry", the girl narrator is not "able to speak up in her own or others' defense" (Powers 109).

There is another reason why the girl narrator and other Chinese American children are always silent in the presence of white Americans. They are instructed by their parents and other

older Chinese immigrants not to talk to Americans, because the children will give away their “immigration secrets” which “could get [them] sent back to China” (Kingston, *The Woman* 183). Of course, what is at issue here is the discriminatory laws that forbade Chinese immigrants from entering the country in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As introduced previously, in order to gain entrance, some Chinese immigrants faked their immigration documents in order to become “paper sons” and pass the customs. They were afraid that their American-born children would expose their false identity to American immigration inspectors. In their eyes, these children “had been born among ghosts, were taught by ghosts, and were ... half ghosts” (Kingston, *The Woman* 183). The first generation of Chinese immigrants often referred to Americans and other non-Chinese as “ghosts”, because the “ghosts” looked different and not to be trusted. Their children could be assimilated by the “ghosts” while growing up in an environment full of “ghosts”. Thus, the girl narrator and other Chinese American children are told not to talk to Americans.

Then, there is the difficulty of speaking a new language for the girl narrator and her ethnic peers. When the narrator has to speak English for the first time in kindergarten, she remains silent and feels dumb and shameful (Kingston, *The Woman* 165). Other Chinese American girls at the American school are also scared to speak in class, in the playground, and at lunch (Kingston, *The Woman* 166). The unfamiliar American language and environment intimidate them. In contrast, once they enter Chinese school after American school, they all regain their voice: “we chanted together, voices rising and falling, loud and soft, some boys shouting, everybody reading together, reciting together and not alone with one voice” (Kingston, *The Woman* 167). The familiar Chinese language and environment immediately make them feel safe and at home. As soon as they step into the Chinese school, they become themselves again, and not a discriminated minority.

However, even at the Chinese school, there is a Chinese American girl who still remains silent. This is a meek and demure girl who fits the Orientalist stereotypes of a perfect Chinese female. When she speaks, she whispers. “Her whisper was as soft as if she had no muscles. She seemed to be breathing from a distance” (Kingston, *The Woman* 173). There is “no anger or tension” in her whisper (Kingston, *The Woman* 173). The narrator hates the girl’s quietness, because she reminds her of the stereotypes and subjugation of Chinese American women, including herself. One day after class, the narrator can no longer contain her hatred and tries to force the silent girl to talk by violence. She scolds her, saying:

You don’t see I’m trying to help you out, do you? Do you want to be like this, dumb (do you know what dumb means?), your whole life? ... And you, you are a plant. Do you know that? That’s all you are if you don’t talk. If you don’t talk, you can’t have a personality. You’ll have no personality and no hair. You’ve got to let people know you have a personality and a brain. (Kingston, *The Woman* 180)

The narrator tries to teach the silent girl the importance of having her own voice. Without her own voice, she is devoid of a personality, like an object or a tree. The narrator cries, yells, and screams at the girl, and uses every way she can think of to get her to talk or only to scream, because she sees herself in the silent girl (Outka 478). She wishes to wake herself up and break away from her own silence by attacking a perfectly conventional Chinese American girl.

The above scene mirrors how Brave Orchid forces her sister Moon Orchid to confront the latter’s husband. He leaves Moon Orchid in Hong Kong and starts a new life in America. After hearing about his new wife and business success in America, Moon Orchid cannot find the courage to face her husband. Brave Orchid pushes her to “walk right into his office” and “make an announcement” to everyone; but Moon Orchid is “so scared” that she cannot even “move” (Kingston, *The Woman* 150). Having lived by the rules of patriarchal society in China and being frightened by the coldness of American society, she never learns to speak for herself. Her name “Moon” (月) has the connotation of feminine, weak, and meek in Chinese culture. She

is not as “brave” as her sister Brave Orchid. Later, when Brave Orchid tricks the husband to meet Moon Orchid, “Moon Orchid started to whimper... But all she did was open and shut her mouth without any words coming out” (Kingston, *The Woman* 152). As a symbol of American superiority and male dominance, her husband silences Moon Orchid. He accuses her as follows: “It’s a mistake for you to be here. You can’t belong. You don’t have the hardness for this country” (Kingston, *The Woman* 152-53). What he says is right however, because Moon Orchid’s silence and daunted personality make her unfit to fight for an identity and a life of her own. His words destroy Moon Orchid’s last chance to be herself.

After this failed meeting with her husband, Moon Orchid gradually becomes disoriented and loses herself. In his article “Of Bones and Suicide: Sky Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Cafe* and Fae Myenne Ng’s *Bone*”, Goellnicht points out that “Moon Orchid’s frustration and resulting silence nullifies her agency, and the loss of agency and dignity in that repressive, violating act subsequently causes her to lose her mind” (380). She can “only appropriate as her own the subjectivity of others, spending her days following nieces and nephews through the house, describing what they do, repeating what they say, asking what their words mean” (Smith 72). This behavior suggests that Moon Orchid no longer has a voice of herself, nor does she possess a life of her own. Eventually she collapses and goes mad.

The silent girl in Chinese school and Moon Orchid’s tragedy remind the narrator that if a Chinese migrant female wants to survive in America, she has to overcome both Chinese patriarchy and American racism. She needs the courage of a woman warrior to speak for herself, like her mother Brave Orchid. In *The Woman Warrior*, the girl narrator learns to find her voice by listening to her mother’s stories and then retelling them. In the process, she is transformed from a listener into a story teller. For example, after listening to the stories of the swordswoman and Fa Mu Lan, the girl narrator learns that she can also be a “heroine” and “swordswoman” and so chooses to “grow up a warrior woman” (Kingston, *The Woman* 19-20). She not only becomes

a good listener, but also tries to establish connections between her mother's stories and herself. Her retelling those stories to the reader is a type of response to her mother. In Klarina Priborkin's words in the article "Cross-Cultural Mind-Reading; Or, Coming to Terms with the Ethnic Mother in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*", "It is through the dialogical and the relational... interaction with the mother, that the daughter's subjectivity finally consolidates in a narrative" (174). Since it is dialogical, the girl narrator's retelling is not an exact repetition of her mother's stories but a reconstruction from her own perspective. In this way she reveals her own burgeoning subjectivity. Walter S. H. Lim notes that "uprooting 'originary' meanings in Asia and transplanting them onto the radically different context of the American experience involves both dissemination and translation" (159). Her mother's stories represent the narrator's Chinese origin, while her own understanding and reinterpretations of them reflect the narrator's reconstruction of her own identity based on her Chinese origin.

Let us look at how the narrator retells the story of the No Name Woman. In her mother's version, the No Name Woman is a silent and powerless victim. Yet the narrator violates her mother's warning that "You should not tell anyone" (Kingston, *The Woman* 3). Indeed, she goes on to reconstruct the missing parts of the story by using empathy. In the narrator's new version, the No Name Woman mounts to a "heroic feminist rebellion against the strictures of Confucian patriarchy" (Goellnicht 302). She bravely seeks her own love and even seduces men for her own pleasure. Thus, the woman who should have been forgotten and erased from history is revived in the girl narrator's retelling. She obtains a new identity and becomes the girl narrator's "forerunner," a woman warrior who fights for her freedom to love (Kingston, *The Woman* 8).

Another example is the narrator's recreation of the stories of Fa Mu Lan and Yue Fei. Fa Mu Lan is the heroine in the long poem *The Ballad of Mulan* (《木兰辞》) created in the Southern and Northern Dynasty. Seeing that her father was too old to fight, she took her father's place and joined the army. Since women were forbidden to enlist at that time, she disguised

herself as a man until her army won the war and she returned home. Yue Fei was a heroic general in the Song Dynasty. He is famous for his bravery in fighting against the nation state of Jin and his loyalty to his country. His mother carved four characters “精忠报国” (meaning, be loyal and fight for your country) on his back before he joined the army. In *The Woman Warrior*, the narrator combines these two heroic figures and creates her own version of a swordswoman. This swordswoman receives training, forms an army, and revenges the enemies of her people. Her parents also carve “revenge” on her back. Behaving like a male hero, she defies all the hindrance on women. For example, she keeps on martial arts training during menstrual days (Kingston, *The Woman* 30), and never leaves battle fields even when she is pregnant (Kingston, *The Woman* 39). Lan Dong remarks that the narrator’s recreation “emphasizes the coexistence of womanhood and military prowess within her character” (51). The narrator’s recreation again reveals her wish to become a woman warrior who avenges all the grief she suffers as a girl growing up in a Chinese immigrant family. In her words, “The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar” (Kingston, *The Woman* 53).

Through retelling the stories of the No Name Woman and the swordswoman, the narrator crafts her own models. The narrator’s empathetic investment in the No Name Woman and her resemblance to the swordswoman signify her inheritance of their independent, rebellious, and brave spirits. Since the source of these stories is her mother, her retelling and reinterpretation of them help her to understand her mother’s and family’s cultural milieu. These stories function as a bridge that connects her to her mother and Chinese culture. In her article “Cross-Cultural Mind-Reading; Or, Coming to Terms with the Ethnic Mother in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*”, Priborkin remarks that “it is ... through a renewed perception of our identity as relational rather than individualistic that a change in our perception of diversity can occur” (174). People do not exist and grow as isolated individuals but are influenced by others around them.



The narrator's revision of her mother's stories changes how she views her mother and her own growth as well.

At the beginning of *The Woman Warrior*, the narrator does not understand her mother and judges "her behavior according to the yardstick of American appropriateness" (Priborkin 163). She feels embarrassed by her mother's "screams in public libraries or over telephones" (Kingston, *The Woman* 11). So she intentionally speaks "in an inaudible voice...to turn [her]self American-feminine" (Kingston, *The Woman* 11). She concludes that Chinese communication is loud and rude compared with the soft American voice. So she tries to distance herself from the Chinese heritage embodied in her mother. This leads to a confrontation between the mother who symbolizes old China and the narrator who tries to immerse herself in American culture. Paul Outka explains that for the mother "China is real, America ghostly," while for the narrator "China is mythic, exotic, the often threatening seat of imagination" (469). Retelling her mother's stories helps the narrator to bridge the gap between them and understand her mother's hardship.

The narrator knows that Brave Orchid does not like America, because by emigrating she lost the land of her birth. In China, Brave Orchid was a respected doctor. When she made calls, she "always dressed well"; "some villages brought out their lion and danced ahead of [her]" (Kingston, *The Woman* 77). Yet in America, all this is lost and her personal prestige with it. In America, she has to labor all day in the laundry like other American "ghosts". As Wang Jianping notes, "For the mother, moving to America means loss of identity and reality— being reduced to ghosts in an alien land" (153). In her mind, "America has been full of machines and ghosts—Taxi Ghosts, Bus Ghosts, Police Ghosts, Fire Ghosts, Meter Reader Ghosts, Tree Trimming Ghosts, Five-and-Dime Ghosts" (Kingston, *The Woman* 96-97). She calls Americans "ghosts" because they are incomprehensible and seem to belong to an alien world. For her the real world is the one she left in China. So Brave Orchid stubbornly fights against American

assimilation and seeks to preserve her Chinese heritage as best as she can. This explains why she does not change her name “Brave Orchid” even after emigrating — “adding no American name nor holding one in reserve for American emergencies” (Kingston, *The Woman* 77). She strongly believes that only her Chinese name embodies her identity. Her rebellion against Americanization turns Brave Orchid into another woman warrior in the narrator’s heart.

By recounting Brave Orchid’s past, the narrator gradually realizes that what she is trying to reject is not Chinese culture or China, but patriarchal conventions and the stereotypical “Chineseness” that is forced upon her and other Chinese immigrants by American society (Wang 136). Like her mother before her, she must find her own path and establish her own identity. Her mother did not fully accomplish this, but the narrator will pick up where her mother left off.

The final story of the poetess Ts’ai Yen symbolizes this reconciliation between the narrator and her mother. The narrator describes it as “a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also talk story. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine” (Kingston, *The Woman* 206). It means that the narrator has accepted her Chinese heritage and is willing to continue the task that her mother did not finish, but this time, in her own way. In the story of Ts’ai Yen, the heroine lived among the barbarians for twelve years. Although they spoke different languages, the barbarians’ flute and Ts’ai Yen’s singing reached a form of harmony and mutual understanding through music. Even her children, who were born among the barbarians, sang along to the music (Kingston, *The Woman* 209). In the story Ts’ai Yen resembles Brave Orchid, who migrated to America and missed China dearly. The narrator, too, is like one of Ts’ai Yen’s children who could not understand their mother’s tongue. Brave Orchid’s stories fuse Chinese heritage and American context together, thereby breaking down the boundaries between the mother and the narrator and between Chinese and American culture. According to Bobby Fong in his article “Maxine Hong Kingston's Autobiographical Strategy in *The Woman Warrior*”, “Personal development is not growth toward autonomy, but reattachment to familial and cultural

patterns, albeit in new and surprising ways” (117). The narrator takes up her mother’s unfinished stories and sings along with her mother’s music in her own voice. It is a voice that embraces both her mother’s Chinese past and her American present. It identifies the narrator’s place as a Chinese American ethnic in America.

In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston presents a Chinese American girl’s search for voice and identity. It is a book that attempts to fight against the stereotypes of Chinese immigrants, especially Chinese American women, as a docile and silent model minority. Yet Kingston’s presentation has often inspired heated debates over her stereotyping of Chinese immigrants and the Chinese people in general. The first issue involves the generic identity of the book. Its subtitle already points to the cause of the controversy: “Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts”. “Memoirs” suggests that it is autobiographical, yet the plural form alludes to its multiple narrators and perspectives. The term “Ghosts”, which are fictional and otherworldly beings, seems to work against the book’s autobiographical and nonfictional status. Although “Kingston originally intended it for publication as a novel,” when the publisher Knopf printed the book for the first time in 1976, it was labeled as “nonfiction”, because Knopf “thought it would sell better” (Outka 447). In the same year, the book “won the National Book Critics Circle Award for the best work of nonfiction” (Outka 447). The marketing strategy and the book’s American reception tend to label this book as an autobiography about the real lives of Chinese immigrants.

It is clearly not accurate to label *The Woman Warrior* an autobiography and leave it at that, since it includes so many fictional and fantasized stories besides the history of Kingston’s family. Even so, in his article “Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake”, Frank Chin criticizes both Kingston and the publishers for promoting stereotypes of Chinese immigrants and ethnic culture. He claims that “the only form of literature written by Chinese Americans that major publishers will publish (other than the cookbook) is autobiography, an exclusive Christian form; and they all write to the specifications of the Christian stereotype of

Asian being the opposite morally from the West as it is geographically” (Chin, “Come” 8). In his opinion, autobiography is a Christian genre and does not belong to the Chinese literary tradition. For Chin, it is a betrayal for Chinese American writers to write in a Western genre and cater to Western readers and publishers’ tastes. Chin further condemns Kingston for mixing history and fantasy because this kind of “autobiography... is simply a device for destroying history and literature” (“Come” 3) and “completely escaped the real China and Chinese America into pure white fantasy where nothing is Chinese, nothing is real, everything is born of pure imagination” (“Come” 49). In other words, Chin believes that Kingston’s “autobiography” invests heavily in a form of false history in order to cater to the West’s stereotypical fantasy of China and Chinese immigrants.

In her reply to Chin, Kingston points out that her book is in fact fiction, or more specifically, a memoir. In “Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers”, she explains, “I am not writing history or sociology but a ‘memoir’ like Proust... a series of stories or anecdotes to illuminate the times rather than be autographical” (Kingston 64). In other words, this book is not a collection of biographical facts, but a fictional construction meant to illuminate Americans about Chinese immigrants’ problems and identity. Thus, Frank Chin is too dogmatic in categorizing *The Woman Warrior* as autobiography. In addition, one cannot simply identify the author with the girl narrator. Neither “Maxine” nor the narrator’s name ever appears in the book. In an interview Kingston also points out that “It’s hard for me to call her [the girl narrator] me, because this is an illusion of writing. She is so coherent and intense always, throughout. There’s an intensity of emotion that makes the book come together. And I’m not like that” (Thompson, “This” 6). This observation further refutes the attempt to categorize the book as autobiography. That said, how do we classify this book? Does it belong to more than one genre?

The literary critic Sau-ling Cynthia Wong advances the following classification: it is “a ‘postmodern’ text. Blending ‘fact’ with fiction, autobiography with folktale elements, the work

maps out the contradictions that arise from a collision between two distinct cultures” (“Autobiography” 223). This description reveals the hybrid nature of *The Woman Warrior*, which challenges the conventional definitions of autobiography, memoir, and fiction. The hybrid construction of the book coincidentally mirrors the hybrid identity of Chinese Americans as well. That is to say, we cannot simply judge Chinese Americans according to the definition of a Chinese or an American. Matters are more complex than that.

In addition to the issue of genre, *The Woman Warrior* also stirs up debate on whether Kingston creates stereotypes of Chinese people from an Orientalist perspective. Kingston’s China is a world where science and magic coexist; women are mistreated; humans, spirits, and ghosts interact in everyday life. Some critics, especially those in China, vehemently criticize the book’s twisted and mystified depiction of Chinese people and society. For example, Hu Yan (胡燕) and Huang He (黄荷), two Chinese literary scholars from PLA Information Engineering University, write:

because of her environment, educational background, and identity, Kingston falls into the pitfall of orientalist during the process of [literary] expression, and coincides with the direction of ‘the other culture’ in the Sinology of mainstream American society. In her writing, Chinese society is portrayed as a place filled with feudal ethics, old customs, and backward habits, and Chinese people were depicted as mysterious, strange, ignorant, and superstitious. (14)

These critics believe that Kingston writes from an American orientalist perspective in order to provide American readers with stereotypes of an exotic, mysterious, and backward China and its people.

Frank Chin also attacks Kingston for stereotyping China and Chinese people, but from the angle of distorting Chinese history and literature. According to Chin, Chinese American writers like Kingston

boldly fake the best-known works from the most universally known body of Asian literature and lore in history. And, to legitimize their faking, they have to fake all of Asian American history and literature, and argue that the immigrants who

settled and established Chinese America lost touch with Chinese culture, and that a faulty memory combined with new experience produced new versions of these traditional stories. This version of history is their contribution to the stereotype. (“Come” 3)

According to Chin, Kingston distorts the original versions of Chinese literature and history to cater to American readers’ fantasy of Chinese culture. To support his argument, Chin compares Kingston’s recreation of the tales of Fa Mu Lan and Yue Fei with the original versions. He writes that “the real Fa Mulan is a chant that describes the oldest daughter of an aged father too decrepit to answer the Khan’s call for him to mount and lead his estate’s army into a great war” (Chin, “Come” 4). But Kingston “turns her into a champion of Chinese feminism and an inspiration to Chinese American girls to dump the Chinese race and make for white universality” (Chin, “Come” 27). Beyond that, Chin believes that it is unforgivable to mistake and mix these two different mythical heroes together. Although Chinese immigrants are far from their home country, those tales “are still chanted by children in Chinatowns around the Western hemisphere” (Chin, “Come” 3). He argues that “Myths are, by nature, immutable and unchanging because they are deeply ingrained in the cultural memory, or they are not myths” (“Come” 29). Any changes to the original forms are detrimental to the foundation of a culture and identity.

Kingston responds to Frank Chin’s criticism on her changing the Chinese myths to Western stereotypes in two ways. First, myths belong to oral tradition. They change “from one speaker to another and from one listener to another. And when you tell a story again, it changes.” (Kingston, “Opening” 23). In her opinion, “a myth only stays alive if it changes, and it dies if it is fixed” (Kingston, “Opening” 23). Having lived in Hawaii in the past, Kingston seems to be using the Hawaiian tradition of the “Talk Story”. According to Brenda Kwon, “much of early Hawaiian literature remains oral” (463). Later writers such as David Malo (1797-1853), John Papa ‘I‘i (1800-70), and Samuel Mānaiakalani Kamakau (1815-1876) “made significant contributions to establishing a written literary tradition (Kwon 463). The Hawaiian literature gradually develops

into the tradition of “Talk Story”, which is a hybrid of oral and written narration. Kingston evidently has learned much from the Hawaiian literary tradition of “Talk story,” and she even wrote the preface to the anthology *Talk Story: An Anthology of Hawaii’s Local Writers*. She applies this hybrid form of narration perhaps to match the hybrid identity of Chinese Americans.

However, Kingston’s idea that myths and stories keep changing contradicts Frank Chin’s belief that we must not change myths since they belong to the foundation of our culture. Yet Kingston asserts that myths evolve and diversify, much in the way that she herself blends the tales of Fa Mu Lan and Yue Fei in *The Woman Warrior*. Sau-ling Wong supports Kingston’s view by pointing out that “the Fa Mu Lan story itself, which many of Kingston’s critics take to be a fixed and sacred given, actually exists in a multitude of Chinese texts differing from each other in purpose as well as detail” (“Autobiography” 271). In short, Frank Chin’s declaration that myths are “immutable and unchanging” is, at least, questionable.

The second point of Kingston’s response to Chin concerns her identity as an American writer. As she clarifies, “I am an American writer, who, like other American writers, wants to write the great American novel. *The Woman Warrior* is an American book. Yet many reviewers do not see the American-ness of it, nor the fact of my own American-ness” (Kingston, “Cultural” 57-58). When she writes about Chinese myths, she is writing from the perspective of an American ethnic writer interpreting Chinese myths in her own peculiar way. In other words, the stories in *The Woman Warrior* are “American mythology in American language” (Li, “China” 496). For this reason, the narrator in the book, an American-born Chinese ethnic, modifies and recreates those traditional Chinese myths. Her American cultural background has influenced how she understands and retells them.

However, Kingston’s clarifications do not fully satisfy those who also accuse her of stereotyping the Chinese and Chinese immigrant characters in *The Woman Warrior*. In effect, at one point Kingston’s narrator says, “Chinese smeared bad daughters-in-law with honey and tied

them naked on top of ant nests...A husband may kill a wife who disobeys him. Confucius said that” (Kingston, *The Woman* 193). Admittedly, the narrator is not Kingston the author, so we cannot equate the narrator’s storytelling to Kingston’s perception of Chinese and Chinese immigrants. Moreover, the narrator was born in America and never lived in China. All her knowledge and understanding of China and Chinese people are based upon her mother’s stories. Thus, her stories about Chinese and Chinese immigrants are indirect, unstable, and unreliable. Even the narrator herself does not know if her mother’s stories are real or not. At one point, she tells her mother, “You won't tell me a story and then say, 'This is a true story,' or, 'This is just a story.' I can't tell the difference. I don't even know what your real names are. I can't tell what's real and what you make up” (Kingston, *The Woman* 202). Therefore, “due to her confusion, limited knowledge, desire for absolutes, and total subjectivity regarding people and events, her narration is unreliable” (TuSmith 280). In other words, the Chinese American narrator is not able to distinguish the fictional stories and the realities of China. At the beginning of *The Woman Warrior*, she questions, “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” (Kingston 5). These words reflect the dilemma of the girl narrator, Maxine Hong Kingston, and other Chinese Americans who try to retrieve their Chinese heritage yet are not able to judge if their access to it is authentic or fictional.

In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston wants the readers to judge and construct their own perception of Chinese and Chinese immigrants, based upon the girl narrator’s unreliable retelling. Nonetheless, Kingston’s approach still produces the possibility that American readers will take the narrator’s fantasized and unreliable depiction of Chinese and Chinese immigrants as facts. As Sau-ling Wong notes, “readers who do not pay sufficient attention to the narrative intricacies of *The Woman Warrior*, especially white readers with biased expectations, will



mistake fiction for fact” (“Autobiography” 252). Kingston herself acknowledges that “there are so many levels of knowledge and ignorance in the audience” (“Cultural” 63). Many readers, even literary critics, equate the narrator with Kingston and take her narration as Kingston’s. Such misreading undoubtedly does little to undermine the stereotyping process. However, Kingston believes that these lapses are the readers’ faults: “How dare they call their ignorance our inscrutability!” (“Cultural” 56). Although readers’ ignorance of China and Chinese immigrants does not help to go beyond the stereotypes, Kingston’s narrative exaggeration and fantacization are in part responsible for misleading the readers who do not know Chinese culture well and reinforce some stereotypes that are already deep-rooted in the Western world.

Finally, critics question Kingston’s representation of Chinese American women as well as her characterization of Chinese Americans as an American ethnic group. As Deborah Woo has observed in his article “Maxine Hong Kingston: The Ethnic Writer and the Burden of Dual Authenticity”, “Ethnic minority writers are saddled with a burden that mainstream writers rarely confront, the burden of being viewed narrowly as spokespersons for the 'ethnic' experience” (173). In this context, Kingston’s description of Chinese and Chinese immigrants—especially where the narrator describes how women were mistreated— could harm the image and reputation of Chinese American community. In short, Kingston is not a qualified spokesperson for Chinese Americans.

On the other hand, some critics question why an ethnic writer has to be a spokesperson for his or her community in the first place. According to Amy Ling, “Must the multicultural writer/artist be totally and exclusively answerable to his or her ethnic community, be the spokesperson of that community, tell the community's stories and tell them accurately? Or can she or he claim the right to express an individual vision and personal concern , and to modify the myths and legends of a group to his or her own artistic purpose?” (“Emerging”195-96). What Ling emphasizes is the writer’s individuality. Kingston also asks, “Why must I ‘represent’ anyone

besides myself? Why should I be denied an individual artistic vision?" ("Cultural" 63). For her, *The Woman Warrior* is a personal work that does not try to represent other people, such as the Chinese American community. The "memoirs of a girlhood" in the book's subtitle implies its personal nature.

However, the plural form of "memoirs" in the subtitle of this book also suggests that there are multiple perspectives, sources, and interpretations. In other words, *The Woman Warrior* is a collective text as well. Although there is only one narrator in the book, the narration as a whole features diverse sources such as her mother, brothers, uncles, and her own experience. In Paul Eakin's words, this book is "the story of a relational model of identity, developed collaboratively with others, often family members" (57). Through the girl's retelling of other Chinese immigrants' lives, we do have access to a part of the Chinese American community. In "Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers", Kingston writes, "I do believe in the timelessness and universality of individual vision. It would not just be a family book or an American book or a woman's book but a world book, and, at the same moment, my book" (65). Her words support both the personal and collective nature of *The Woman Warrior*. In this book, individual and collective voices of Chinese immigrants coexist. Huntley comprehensively summarizes the issue of representation in *The Woman Warrior* as follows: "By writing for herself, Kingston legitimizes her stories to herself. By writing for the general audience, she ensures the dissemination of the stories that she wants to include in the American narrative. And finally, by writing for her fellow Chinese Americans, she introduces to that group one voice that she hopes will inspire others to speak out" (29). To some extent, it is irrelevant to ask if Kingston does or does not represent the Chinese American community in *The Woman Warrior*, because the multiple layers and meanings of this book offer the reader a broad spectrum of perspectives. This book also inspires us to rethink the fundamental instabilities when we try to determine if a work or an author is stereotyping or authentic to the image of Chinese and Chinese Americans. The

determinants sometimes may be stereotypes themselves. I will discuss this issue in detail in part 4.4 by focusing on David Henry Hwang's *Trying to Find Chinatown*.

To sum up, in *The Woman Warrior* Kingston presents a Chinese American girl's search for identity through retelling her families' stories and learning to follow the heroines in those stories. In this process, she begins to understand the pain and struggle of Chinese immigrants, especially women like her mother and aunts. In order to find their voices, Chinese American women had to overcome both the impositions of Chinese patriarchal culture and the racist stereotypes from American society. Their anger and grief turned them into strong-willed women warriors. The stories of these women warriors connect the girl narrator to her mother and her Chinese ancestry, which becomes an essential feature of her voice and identity. Although Kingston sought to destroy the stereotypes of Chinese and Chinese immigrants in *The Woman Warrior*, this book has stirred up a number of important debates. Even though Kingston defends herself by saying that her book is fictional and personal, the overgeneralized and fantasized depiction of Chinese culture and Chinese immigrants may still lead readers to reinforce their perception of Chinese Americans. Still, this book encourages Chinese ethnics in America to find their own voice and go beyond the existent stereotypes. *The Woman Warrior* certainly pointed out the way forward for the coming civil rights movements that followed.

#### 4.3. Corky Lee's Photographic Combat of Chinese Migrant Identity

In the previous part, I have discussed Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and its role in giving Chinese American women a voice. In this part, I will focus on Chinese Americans' struggle for civil rights from a photographic perspective. As William Wei has noted in *The Asian American Movement*, the political activism of Chinese Americans started in the late 1960s (11). Two major historical events inspired them. One was the "Black Power movement," which emphasized African American "racial pride and...culture" and attacked the racial discrimination

(Wei 42). Thanks to the incessant efforts of this movement, a series of laws were passed to protect the equal rights of ethnic groups. For example, “the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act prohibited discrimination in voting, education, employment, and public facilities and gave the federal government the power to enforce desegregation by denying federal funds to segregated schools and programs; the 1968 Civil Rights Act barred racial discrimination in the sale or rental of housing” (Wei 12). As ethnic minorities, Chinese Americans began to realize that they also needed to fight for their rights. In addition, they united with other ethnic minorities from Asia, such as Japanese Americans, Filipino Americans, Korean Americans and others, to form this “new sociopolitical entity called the Asian American” (Wei 1). This concept brought the isolated struggles of several small groups together and produced a louder voice and stronger power to combat discrimination and stereotypes.

The second event was the anti-war movement of the 1960s. The Vietnam War aroused waves of public protests in America. The rising death toll in Vietnam shocked the American public and the Asian American communities. The anti-war movements again helped to unite Asian Americans and made them aware of their common “Asian” origin. They saw the need for an Asian American movement to assert and protect their ethnic identity. The majority of the Asian American civil rights activists were college students. In 1968, Asian American students at San Francisco State College organized a “long and bitter Third World Strike” (Nee 355). It marked the beginning of the rise of Asian American civil rights movements in the following decades. They argued that as full-fledged American citizens, their voice and image should also become a part of American history.

Among these Asian American activists, Corky Lee (1948- ) is one of the most influential photographers to demonstrate through his art that “Asian and Asian-Pacific Americans are part and parcel to the American experience” (Rosen F3). Lee once pointed out in a speech on the occasion of the opening of his photographic exhibition “Life, Liberty & Justice: Asian American

Style” that “the majority of the American public never sees Asian Pacific Americans in patriotic settings and advocating for democratic rights and justice. When it does occur, it seems like a visual oxymoron” (“Artist”). Especially in this period, American public media often either neglected the presence and voices of Asian Americans or stereotypically tagged them as a silent and obedient “model minority”. So Corky Lee made it his mission to give Asian Americans opportunities to express themselves in his photographs and let their outcry be heard in American society. On his business card, Lee writes, “Undisputed, Unofficial Asian American Photographer Laureate” (Lipson LI9). He explains that he invented this title based on his two idols: John F. Kennedy and Muhammad Ali (Lee, “Untitled” 137). Kennedy once said, “Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country”. “Muhammad Ali claimed he was the undisputed heavyweight champion of the world” (Lee, “Untitled” 137). Lee applied Kennedy’s famous exhortation to those belonging to his ethnic community and aspired to be a photographer for his people. The word “undisputed” shows his commitment to helping the Asian American community, while “unofficial” indicates his modesty that he is not able to speak for every Asian American individual. However, the countless awards and attention he has won for the Asian American community make him an absolute “photographer laureate”.

Corky Lee was born in 1948 in a working class Chinese migrant family in Queens, New York City. His Chinese name is 李国扬 (国 means “nation”, and 扬 means “spread” or “praise”). Migrating from China as a paper immigrant, his father first worked as a welder and then started his own laundry business in Queens (Boxer 31). His mother “was a seamstress” in their family laundry (Boxer 31). His older sister works “in a hand laundry in Pennsylvania and three younger brothers, one who works at a Brooklyn lumberyard, one who scoops ice cream in New Jersey and one who is a public defender in San Diego” (Boxer 31). Having worked alongside his parents in the family laundry and seeing the many hardships of other Chinese immigrants, Corky Lee understands the struggles and discriminatory practices that Chinese immigrants encounter

every day. He remembers what his father once told him, “That Martin Luther King Jr. guy is going to create a better environment for Chinese in America. He’s showing all of us how to obtain fair and equal treatment for all people of color!” (Lee, “Artist”). Lee realized that he too should follow King’s example and strive for equal rights for Chinese immigrants, but in his own way.

Corky Lee is a “self-taught photographer” (Lee, “Untitled” 137). Since junior high school, he was intensely interested in photography. One day he came across an 1869 photograph (Figure 36) showing the completion of the transcontinental railroad at Promontory Point, Utah. In the center of the image, Samuel S. Montague from the Central Pacific Railroad (on the left) shakes hands with Grenville M. Dodge representing the Union Pacific Railroad (on the right). Behind them, workers stand on two trains and hold bottles of champagne to celebrate this historical



Figure 36. Andrew J. Russell. “East and West Shaking Hands at the Laying of Last Rail Union Pacific Railroad.” May 10, 1869. Yale University Libraries.

moment. In the foreground, a large number of railroad workers pose in front of the camera and are now remembered forever in American history. However, this photograph shocked the young Corky Lee, because he could not see any Chinese migrant workers who in fact were the major workforce building the railroads. He asked angrily, “Where were they?... it’s like after you finish a movie, you have a wrap party and everybody who’s involved with the production shows up?! But where were the Chinese?” (Lee, “Untitled” 129-30).

According to the historical record, “more than 12,000 workers from southern China were hired by the Central Pacific Railroad” (Wang, “Descendants”). They did the most dangerous jobs, such as climbing the cliffs, handling dynamite, and carving out tunnels. Many of them had sacrificed their lives during the process. They were also the most hardworking and efficient railroad workers. “In the national parks building at Promontory Point, there’s a sign that says the Chinese laid down ten miles of track in one day. That’s a record that has never been surpassed” (Lee, “Untitled” 130). Then how come Chinese migrant workers were excluded from this historical photograph? Corky Lee remarks, “Well, history, at least photographically says that the Chinese were not present” (Wang, “Descendants”). Due to a viral form of racial discrimination at that time, Chinese immigrants were completely removed from the frame.

That photograph eloquently reflects the invisibility to which Chinese immigrants were subjected in American public media for a long time. But that famous photograph stirred Corky Lee to make Chinese immigrants visible in American history. He writes, “if I could get into the papers it was a form of documentation—showing that Chinatown or other Asian Pacific Americans are part and parcel of the larger landscape” (Lee, “Chinatown” 162). For the next 50 years, photography has become his way to increase Chinese immigrants’ visual presence in mainstream media and help them combat discrimination.

In addition to photography, Corky Lee actively participates in the construction of Chinese American communities. When he was studying at Queens College from 1965 to 1970, he was the

“president of the Chinese student organization” (Lee, “Untitled” 129). After graduating from college, he worked for Two Bridges Neighborhood Council, which did “tenant-organizing in New York near Chinatown” (Rosen F3). From that date forward, he started to take photographs of the Chinatown tenants’ “conditions before they organized to talk to their landlords” (Rosen F3). He also helped found “the Asian Media Collective” in New York in the early 1970s (Boxer A1). In his words, “Chinatown is a part of my soul as well as a physical part of my being” (Lee, “Chinatown, New York” 157). Lee is still doing everything he can to help his people build community.

His close involvement in community helps Corky Lee photograph the lives and struggles of Chinese Americans. Behind the camera, he is both an insider and a keen observer. He understands Chinese Americans’ struggles and presents them unadorned to the public. Professor Jack Tchen, founding director of New York University's Asian/Pacific/American Institute, has written of Lee: "If you want something other than the usual stereotyped images of Chinatown or 'Orientals,' he has them. . . . He also remembers who's who and always has a story to make the images come alive” (Shaw). Corky Lee turns his camera into “a sword to combat indifference, injustice and discrimination, trying to get rid of stereotypes” against Chinese Americans (Jem). Lee explains, “to be a really free democratic country you have to struggle constantly with forces that want to take some of those liberties away” (“Chinatown, New York” 157). Thus, if Chinese Americans want to be visible and destroy discrimination and stereotypes, they have to reveal their power and fight for their rights. In Lee’s photographs, we see not only the everyday life of Chinese Americans but also their historical activism for civil rights. These photographs tell the American public that Chinese Americans are as equally important as any other ethnic groups in this country.

What really launched Corky Lee’s photographic career was a newspaper photograph depicting police brutality during a protest on May 19, 1975 (Figure 37). The photograph below





Figure 37. Corky Lee. "Police Brutality Victim." May 19, 1975. <http://www.knightfoundation.org/articles/corky-lee-asian-arts-initiative>.

appeared on the front page of the *New York Post* on the second day of the protest. In this photograph, a bleeding Chinese American youth is hauled away by two policemen with clubs. A large number of Chinese American protesters follow them. A protester holds the bleeding youth's chest from behind, trying to prevent the police from taking him away. Another protester holding a poster on the left is perhaps yelling at the police to stop. Two cameras on the left margins of this photograph indicate that Corky Lee was not the only photographer present that day.

The cause of this protest was the 27-year-old Chinese American Peter Yew, an architectural engineer, who was beaten and arrested by police due to a minor traffic altercation on April 26, 1975 (Wei 221). A white American driver tried to squeeze his car past a parked car in New York Chinatown, "brushing a crowd of Chinese American onlookers. The angered crowd followed the driver, who seeking protection, drove around the corner to the Fifth Precinct police station on Elizabeth Street" (Lin, *Reconstructing* 135). Being among the crowd, Peter Yew was dragged by

the police to the police station where he was stripped, beaten, and arrested (Lin, *Reconstructing* 135). The police charged Yew with “assaulting a police officer and resisting arrest” (Lin, *Reconstructing* 135).

The Chinese community in New York was furious over the display of police brutality. On May 12, 1975, the members of Asian Americans for Equal Employment (AAFEE) organized a successful demonstration in New York’s Chinatown. According to Leslie Maitland’s news report titled “2,500 Chinese Protest Alleged Police Beating Here” in *New York Times*, over twenty-five hundred Chinatown residents joined the demonstration (L). They demanded that all charges against Yew be dropped and called for an end to discrimination against the Chinese community. A week later, on May 19, the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA) launched another demonstration, which was much larger than the previous one. The merchant elite from CCBA “coordinated the closure of nearly all businesses in Chinatown” (Lin, *Reconstructing* 136). Twenty thousand Chinese American protesters marched from Chinatown to City Hall to protest against police brutality (Lin, *Reconstructing* 136). Soon the demonstrators completely surrounded the building. They “called for the rescinding of charges and payment of damages against Yew, suspension of the police officers who allegedly hit him, and a public apology from the Fifth Precinct police station” (Lin, *Reconstructing* 137). At this time, many New York photographers and journalists were present and recorded the protest, and Corky Lee was one of them.

The photograph titled “March Against Brutality” (Figure 38) is one of the photographs Corky Lee took during the May 19 demonstration. In this photograph, young Chinese Americans march abreast, arm in arm. They shout out the slogans of anti-police violence and anti-discrimination. The crowd behind them hold two large banners written in both Chinese and English: “反抗所有壓迫” (END ALL OPPRESSION!) , “反种族歧视，警察暴力” (END



Figure 38. Corky Lee. “March Against Brutality.” May 19, 1975. *Reconstructing Chinatown: Ethnic Enclave, Global Change*. Ed. Jan Lin. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1998. Print. Page 136.

RACIAL DISCRIMINATION AND POLICE BRUTALITY) , “支持姚案到底！” (SUPPORT YEW’S CASE). In this photograph, an African American also joins the march and shows his support for Chinese Americans and their struggle for equal rights.

During the demonstration, a small conflict broke out between the police and the Chinese American protesters. According to Corky Lee’s description, at first it was some “pushing and shoving,” then police started to drag protesters (Lee, “Chinatown: A Kaleidoscope” CY10). At that point, the protest immediately turned violent as police used brutal force to establish control. The crowd jumped on the police and attempted to defend their position, while the police used their nightsticks to beat the protesters (“May 19”). This is the scene Corky Lee captured in the previous photograph (Figure 37) in which a Chinese American protester is holding his bleeding

head. Two protesters were arrested and taken to the police station (“May 19”). The crowd again surrounded the police station until the two protesters were released (“May 19”).

The next day, the demonstration against police brutality appeared on the front page of *New York Post* with Corky Lee’s photograph (Figure 37). The article and Lee’s photograph attracted the attention of the American public and the FBI’s New York City office (Wei 324). Eventually, Chinese Americans’ anger and dissatisfaction over police brutality and discrimination were heard. In July, “a grand jury dropped the charges against Yew and indicted the two officers who beat him on charges of official misconduct” (Carmody 37). This was an important victory for the Chinese community in New York. Those two demonstrations were also “among the largest demonstrations ever held in New York’s Chinatown” (Lin, *Reconstructing* 137).

One of the organizers of the above two demonstrations was an organization named Asian Americans for Equal Employment (AAFEE). It was founded by Chinese and other Asian Americans in New York City for another demonstration organized in 1974. Its founders were “a group of professionals, students, senior citizens and community residents who were concerned about the lack of Chinese construction workers employed building Confucius Plaza, the first housing complex funded with federal money” (Wei 219-20). Confucius Plaza is the “largest housing project” in the New York Chinatown, “with 762 mostly moderate-income cooperative units, 10 percent of which are low-income” (Lin, *Reconstructing* 134). The decision of the DeMatteis construction firm not to hire any Asian American workers caused great dissatisfaction in the Chinese and Asian American communities in New York City. Over eight thousand people signed a petition to the DeMatteis firm, “calling for the hiring of more Asian Americans” (Wei 220). Yet the company owner Al DeMatteis refused to accept the letter. This event led to the establishment of the AAFEE.

Immediately after the ground breaking ceremony of the Confucius Plaza in March 1974, the AAFEE organized protests at the construction site. They demanded that the DeMatteis firm

hire at least one “Asian American site supervisor” and “forty Asian American construction workers, in accordance with Mayor John Lindsey’s Executive Order 71, which specified that 25 percent of workers in government projects would be minority” (Lin, *Reconstructing* 134).

Although the protests lasted over a month and did not change the DeMatteis firm’s decision, it challenged the stereotype of Chinese and Asian Americans as a silent and obedient “model minority”.

The AAFEE did not give up and organized a larger and longer demonstration starting on May 16. This time, many journalists and photographers, including Corky Lee, arrived at the site and reported the demonstration. According to *New York Times* journalist Paul L. Montgomery’s report on June 1, “several hundreds pickets... marched and chanted outside the Confucius Plaza construction site in Chinatown... in a continuing protest against alleged discrimination against Asian-American workers” (33). The protest also received support from other ethnic members of “Fight Back, Black Economic Survival, and the Black and Puerto Rican Coalition” (Wei 220). They carried signs in English and Chinese saying “The Asians built the railroad; Why not Confucius Plaza”, “DeMatteis, you are big racist”, “We want jobs now”, etc (Montgomery 33). From May 16 to May 30, over 55 persons were arrested for trespassing, disorderly conduct, and blocking traffic (Montgomery 33). Corky Lee again recorded this unprecedented demonstration for Chinese and Asian Americans’ rights of employment.

In the photograph “Confucius Plaza” (Figure 39), a protest leader is giving a speech in front of DeMatteis’s construction site, the Confucius Plaza. Three Chinese American journalists are holding microphones next to the speaker. Another camera man on the left is filming the speech and demonstration. We see supporters from other ethnic minorities on the right of the speaker and in the crowd behind. Two Chinese signs stand out: “冇道理唔請華工” (There is no reason to refuse to hire Chinese workers) and “团结一致 努力到底” (Unite together, fight till



Figure 39. Corky Lee. “Confucius Plaza.” 1974. <http://www.aafe.org/about-us/our-history>.

the end). Behind the protesters, there is DeMatteis’s recruitment sign for constructing the Confucius Plaza. The recruitment advertisement in the background ironically contrasts with the demonstration against discriminatory hiring practices in the foreground. This composition shows Corky Lee’s sharp exposure of the hypocrisy and racism of DeMatteis.

Eventually, after months of protest, the AAFEE obtained their chance to negotiate with DeMatteis. Government officials of New York City met with the AAFEE, DeMatteis, and the president of CCBA M.B. Lee had reached a final agreement (Lin, *Reconstructing* 134-35). DeMatteis would hire “twelve Asian American journeymen and twenty-seven trainees” (Kuo, *Social* 103-4). Among which, “twenty-four jobs” went to Chinese American workers (Wei 221). The charges against the protesters were also dropped (Wei 221). This was a triumph for the Chinese and Asian American communities living around the Chinatown area in New York City. The organizer of the protests, the AAFEE and Corky Lee also built up their reputation among Asian American communities.

In addition to photographs of these historical moments, Corky Lee also studied the ordinary lives of Chinese Americans. Taxi drivers, fire fighters, clothing factory workers, and restaurant workers all have become the subjects of his photographs. For example, the photograph titled “Ten Minutes to Four in the Garment Factory, 1976. New York” (Figure 40) shows a daily scene among garment factory workers. Several Chinese American women are busy at the sewing machines. In front of them, piles of half-finished garments lay on the two long work tables. Behind them, there are bunches of cloth piled along the wall. The fluorescent lamps above their heads light up the crowded interior and their sewing tables. However, the focus of this photograph is not the seamstresses but the girl in the white t-shirt. The “Ten Minutes to Four” in the title of this photograph implies that this girl might have finished her day at school and is waiting for her mother at the factory. She holds a piece of cloth in her hands. With knitted brows, she stares away from the camera. Her colorful schoolbag lays on the work table next to her



Figure 40. Corky Lee. “Ten Minutes to Four in the Garment Factory, 1976. New York.” 1976. *Reconstructing Chinatown: Ethnic Enclave, Global Change*. Ed. Jan Lin. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1998. Print. Page 62.



mother. She looks bored, since her mother and other workers are all busy with their work and do not have time for her. In this photograph, the garment factory turns into a day care center for the seamstresses' children.

Corky Lee recalls that he took this photograph in a garment factory on Elizabeth Street in New York: "I was shooting production stills for a documentary, 'From Spikes to Spindles,' when I noticed this kid. Every time I picked up the camera, the kid would turn away, so I held the camera like this and looked away" (Lee, "Chinatown: A Kaleidoscope" CY10). Lee was trying to establish contact with the girl so he could give an on-the-spot presentation of a Chinese American seamstress's daughter. Perhaps this girl reminded him of his own childhood when his mother was also a seamstress in his father's laundry shop.

In fact, this photograph shows the life of a good many Chinese American women in New York's Chinatown in the 1960s and 70s. According to *The Chinatown Study Report*, in 1969 "in New York's Chinatown ... 75 percent of the women worked in garment factories" (Wei 174). They often had to work over "forty hours a week and at least a twelve-hour day" (Wei 174). Needless to say, they did not have time to take care of their children or family. Beyond that, they were usually heavily exploited by Chinese American business owners. Mason Wong, president of the Intercollegiate Chinese for Social Action, points out that "the only way to survive in our community is exploit each other, hence the myth of the successful Chinese businessman. This exploitation is perpetuated at the expense of the Chinese immigrants who can only find work in the sweatshops, laundries and restaurants in Chinatown" (Orrick 110). Due to their lack of language proficiency and professional skills, many Chinese American women ended up in sweatshops. Corky Lee's photograph indirectly reveals the harsh working environment, the heavy workload, and exploitation that they faced daily.

From from the 1960s to the present, Corky Lee has continued to photograph Chinese immigrants as part of his campaign against the stereotyping of his people. He says, "if I take



photographs and persevere in what I do, I can send that message out to other people: listen, you should take another look at what you perceive to be Chinatown” (Lee, “Chinatown, New York” 162). His photographs make up for the missing images of Chinese Americans in American public media and inspire Chinese and other Asian Americans to fight for their rights. According to a news report titled “Chinese American Hero Corky Lee” posted on *Asianweek.com*, to celebrate Corky Lee’s contribution to “shaping American perceptions of Asian American society,” “in 1988, former New York City Mayor David Dinkins dedicated May 5th to honoring Lee’s body of work. Lee was honored a second time with May 7, 1993 being announced as ‘Corky Lee Day’ to again commemorate his fine work on behalf of the Asian American community”. Soon, he became the most widely known photographer to document Chinese and Asian American communities. His work constantly appears in *Time Magazine*, *New York Times*, *The Village Voice*, *Associated Press*, *The Villager*, *Downtown Express* and exhibitions throughout America.

In Judy Lei’s interview “Corky Lee: The People’s Photographer,” Corky Lee says of his photographs that “It’s an art of persuasion. ... It is documentary and history. And sometimes, photography is a form of propaganda”. Corky Lee turns his photographs into propaganda by promoting the images of Chinese Americans in the history of America. His photographs argue eloquently that Chinese immigrants do exist and do matter as much as any other Americans. After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, “he was hired by *Amerasia Journal* to cover the lives of Asian Pacific Americans in New York City” (Leong V). Although the whole world’s attention was directed to the World Trade Center, less attention was given to Manhattan Chinatown where people were also suffering from the disaster. According to Corky Lee’s study, there used to be “over 120 garment shops in Chinatown before 9/11, and about 40 of them closed up within three months after 9/11” (“New York’s Chinatown” 195). “23 percent of the worker population in Chinatown, were laid off. Total wage losses were estimated at \$114

million” (*Chinatown* 3). Corky Lee used photographs to show that the Chinatown residents also needed a helping hand to get back on their feet again.

Corky Lee’s photographs and the struggles of the Chinatown residents soon drew the attention of the American government. On December 1, 2001, the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Labor, Elaine L. Chao, visited New York’s Chinatown in Manhattan and brought the financial assistance that the residents needed badly. Corky Lee recorded Chao’s visit in his photographs, among which there is one that acknowledges the efforts of Corky Lee and the Chinatown residents. This is a photograph (Figure 41) of a “One Million Dollars” check from the U.S. Department of Labor. This check is given to “N.Y. STATE DEPARTMENT OF LABOR FOR CHINATOWN RELIEF AND ASSISTANCE”. It is signed by Elaine L. Chao on the date of her visit to New York’s Chinatown. As a Chinese American herself, Elaine L. Chao’s visit indicates that the needs of the Chinatown residents were heard. Probably she had also seen



Figure 41. Corky Lee. “Untitled.” Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA). December 1, 2001. <http://911chinatown.mocanyc.org/album/CorkyLee.html>.

Corky Lee's photographs of the plight in Chinatown after 9/11. This financial assistance surely would help them restore the life and business in this Chinese American community.

Corky Lee never forgets the disheartening photograph showing the completion of the transcontinental railroad at Promontory Point, Utah in 1869. In 2002, he went back to the site with members of the Organization of Chinese Americans and reshot that historical photograph (Lipson LI9). In this new visual document, we finally see the faces of the descendants of those invisible Chinese migrant railroad laborers. In 2008, Corky Lee went back to Promontory Point a second time and shot another photograph with "400 Chinese Americans from all across the country" ("Chinese American"). In 2014, he returned a third time, on the 145th anniversary of the completion of the transcontinental railroad, and took a photograph with the descendants of the Chinese migrant laborers who helped to build the railroad (Figure 42).

In this latest photograph, Corky Lee positions the descendants in the space where they were missing in the original photograph. Lee still keeps the white American workers holding champagne bottles in the background, which mirrors the original setting. 145 years later, the



Figure 42. Corky Lee. "Golden Spike, 2014" 2014. <http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2014/05/10/311157404/descendants-of-chinese-laborers-reclaim-railroads-history>.

presence of these descendants completes the history. In the center of the front row, a middle aged man and a young boy hold an orange-color poster. If we zoom in on the photograph, we can read these words: “Discovering the Past, Defining the Future”. These words sum up the significance of the photograph. By discovering what was missing in the past, Chinese Americans are able to regain their rights and presence in history. The young boy holding the poster will carry on the mission of striving for a better future for Chinese Americans. And Corky Lee will keep photographing their movements and lives. As Lee says, “photographically I tell people, .. I practice photographic justice” (“Chinatown, New York” 157). As long as there is injustice, Lee will be on the job.

#### 4.4. *Trying to Find Chinatown*: David Henry Hwang on Chinese American Identity

In the previous sections of this chapter I have discussed Chinese migrant and Chinese American writers’ and photographers’ fights against stereotypes and for equal rights. Here I will focus on questions about Chinese American identity in relation to David Henry Hwang’s play *Trying to Find Chinatown*. One of the most influential contemporary Chinese American playwrights, Hwang uses his short play specifically to come to terms with the vexed issue of defining who can be authentically considered Chinese American.

A playwright, screenwriter, and librettist, David Henry Hwang was born in a first-generation Chinese immigrant family on “August 11, 1957, in Los Angeles, California” (McDaniel 143). His father, Henry Yuan Hwang was a successful banker from Shanghai. He founded the “first Asian American-owned national bank in the United States,” the Far East National Bank, in Los Angeles in 1974 (Boles, “David”). David’s mother, Dorothy Hwang, was a professor of piano “born in Amoy in southeast China but grew up in the Philippines” (Boles, “David”). She taught her son to read music and play the violin

(Constantakis 222), which would have an important influence on David Henry Hwang's artistic career.

During the 1960s and 70s, the young Hwang took note of the various stereotypes of Chinese Americans on screen, in plays, and other artistic forms: for example, the Charlie Chan movies, the musical film *Flower Drum Song*, the novel and the film adaptation of *The World of Suzie Wong*, among others. All of these works are riddled with stereotypical presentations of Chinese Americans. His interest in the theater inspired him to write about the theme of ethnic identity in the United States, especially that of Chinese Americans. As Hwang once noted, "As a playwright, I find that much of my work has involved a search for authenticity; if I could discover more truthful images to replace the stereotypical ones of my youth, perhaps I could also begin to understand my own identity" ("A New" A1).

Hwang's first play *F.O.B.* (Fresh off the Boat) is an attempt to destroy the Western stereotypes of Chinese immigrants. It was first performed in Hwang's dorm in Stanford University in 1980 and, to his surprise, "won an Obie Award in 1981" (Constantakis 233). Later, Hwang continued research on Chinese American history and culture, and has produced a series of plays about disrupting stereotypes, the confrontation between East and West, and exploring the identity of Chinese Americans. His representative plays include *The Dance and the Railroad* (1981), *M. Butterfly* (1988), *Face Value* (1993), *Trying to Find Chinatown* (1996), *Chinglish* (2011), to name a few. *M. Butterfly* established Hwang as a truly world-renowned playwright. This work attacking the Western stereotype of the East brought him "the 1988 Tony Award, the Drama Desk Award, and the Outer Critics Circle Award" (Marino 1). He became the first Asian American writer to win a Tony Award and have his work staged off Broadway. After *M. Butterfly*, Hwang received more opportunities to work on musical theatre, film, television, live dance, and other artistic forms. In these productions, Hwang challenges the playgoers in America and abroad to question their stereotypes of ethnic groups, including Chinese Americans. To

honor his contribution to American theatre, David Henry Hwang “was selected by the Signature Theatre of New York City to be their playwright in residence for the 2013-14 season” (Lee, *The Theatre* 1). In his article “The Man Who Can Make Bruce Lee Talk” posted in *New York Times Magazine*, Alex Witchel praises that this honor placed Hwang among such notable predecessors as Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, Sam Shepard and August Wilson.

Among David Henry Hwang’s impressive body of work, *Trying to Find Chinatown* perhaps is the shortest in length and simplest in plot. Nevertheless, this does not prevent Hwang from addressing the most vexing questions about Chinese American identity. This play was performed at “the Actors Theatre of Louisville (Jon Jory, Producing Director), as part of the 20th Annual Humana Festival of New American Plays in Louisville, Kentucky, on March 29, 1996” (Hwang, *Trying* 282). In 1999, Hwang published a collection of eight plays titled *Trying to Find Chinatown: The Selected Plays of David Henry Hwang*, which includes this play.

In this ten-minute one-act play, audiences watch two characters, Benjamin and Ronnie, debating how to judge whether one is a Chinese American. Benjamin is a Caucasian male in his early twenties (Hwang, *Trying* 283). A tourist from Midwestern America, he comes to New York City to find his father’s birthplace in the Manhattan Chinatown. In the process Benjamin meets the street musician Ronnie and asks him for directions. Ronnie is a Chinese American in his mid-twenties (Hwang, *Trying* 285). He becomes angry at Benjamin, because he thinks that Benjamin intentionally chose to ask him for direction due to his Chinese American look. In Benjamin’s presence, Ronnie proceeds to satirize the stereotypical perception of Chinatown and Chinese Americans: the dim sum restaurants, opium dens, and Miss Saigon (Hwang, *Trying* 287). However, Ronnie is surprised to hear Benjamin say that he understands all those stereotypes and the struggles of the early Chinese immigrants. In reply, Benjamin explains that he has taken Asian American studies courses at college and claims that he himself is a Chinese American. Since he was adopted by a Chinese American couple as a child, Benjamin argues that it is not

blood but his cultural roots that make him Chinese American. He came to Chinatown in order to discover his roots and who he really is (Hwang, *Trying* 289). Subsequently, Benjamin is equally shocked that Ronnie knows so little about Chinese American history and culture. Ronnie does not believe that Chinatown or the knowledge of Chinese American history alone is able to define his ethnic identity. He uses the history of jazz music as a metaphor to show Benjamin that Chinese ethnic identity never stops developing and evolving into more complex forms. In the end, Benjamin finds his father's old house in Chinatown and Ronnie immerses himself in playing his electric violin on the other side of the stage.

In *Trying to Find Chinatown*, Hwang exposes the stereotypes of Chinatown and Chinese Americans through the dialogue between Benjamin and Ronnie, but he also questions different perspectives on Chinese American identity. Being a tourist and claiming to be a "Chinese American," Benjamin reveals fight of Chinese Americans against the stereotypes such as "the opium den, the sexual objectification of the Asian female, the exorcized image of a tourist's Chinatown which ignores the exploitation of workers, the failure to unionize, the high rate of mental illness and tuberculosis" (Hwang, *Trying* 287). Furthermore, Benjamin's Caucasian appearance challenges definitions of Chinese American identity based on appearance alone. On the other hand, Ronnie's nonchalant attitude toward Chinese American culture and history calls into question the idea that cultural roots are sufficient to determine one's ethnic identity. The heated discussion between Benjamin and Ronnie raises a series of important questions about how we define Chinese American identity: Do we define it on the basis of genes or cultural background? Who has the right to define one's ethnic identity? Does one have to be knowledgeable about one's ethnic culture and history to be an eligible Chinese American? Does one have to fit all the features described in the books on ethnic identity to be a Chinese American? In this play, Hwang does not seek to give us any definitive answers to these questions. Yet the play encourages its audience to rethink how we go about defining ethnicity. As

Hwang writes, “Perhaps the riddle of identity is not one that we are ever meant to answer definitively. Rather, it is by asking the question throughout our own lives and over the course of generations, that we give meaning to our existence, and assert our common humanity” (“A New” A16). Next, I will analyze in detail the perspectives of Ronnie and Benjamin with respect to the issue of defining ethnicity.

In *Trying to Find Chinatown*, Benjamin’s main argument is that it is one’s cultural roots, not genes, that determine ethnic identity. In his essay “Some Comments on the Anthropology of Ethnicity in the United States,” Ulf Hannerz interprets this perspective as an “emphasis on the unique cultural wealth of the minority group, with the implication that its distinctiveness gives it the right to determine its own future and to be treated as the equal of any other group, and on its strengths, largely derived from the historical heritage, rather than on weaknesses which may be due to low social and economic status” (416). In other words, this approach draws on one’s unique cultural heritage and history to form a distinct ethnic identity and emphasizes one’s autonomous culture. It also defies the definition of ethnic identity based on social status, which often leads to negative stereotyping (Jewish bankers, Italian *mafiosi*, for example). In Hwang’s play, Benjamin reacts to Ronnie’s attempt to pigeonhole him as an ignorant white Midwesterner due to his skin color and his mistake of calling an electric violin a “fiddle.” Benjamin argues that “it’s very stereotypical to think that all Asian skin tones conform to a single hue. . . . you can’t judge my race by my genetic heritage alone” (Hwang, *Trying* 289-90). His adoptive family provided the Chinese American culture and environment that forged his Chinese ethnic identity. Benjamin’s argument reflects David Henry Hwang’s rejection of judging identity according to one’s skin color or physical appearance. Hwang says,

the whole idea of skin color doesn't seem to me to be that useful anymore. . . . We have these mythologies that skin color should mean certain things, that we can gain information about the essence of a person by observing certain things in their exterior. I don't know that that's necessarily true, because a lot of times what would be information that you infer from looking at someone's outward



features may be completely at odds with what their interior actually holds.  
(Frocht 124)

In Hwang's view, it is stereotypical and superficial to relate ethnic identity to skin color, especially in a world where multi-national and multi-racial exchanges and marriages are very common.

Instead of skin color and genes, Benjamin points out that cultural roots define his Chinese American identity. Since he lives apart from any Chinese American community, Benjamin turns to books and a course on Asian-American Studies to reconnect to his cultural roots. He learns the history of Chinese American railroad workers, laundry workers, and the god of warriors, Gwan Gung<sup>10</sup>. In addition, his trip to the New York Chinatown expresses his yearning for a sense of communal belonging, or, in his words, "A home. With your people" (Hwang, *Trying* 290). In his opinion, he and the Chinatown residents share the same ethnic culture which makes them a family. This belief in a shared ethnicity, according to Max Weber in his article "Ethnic Groups", is often used to define "ethnic groups": "those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration" (56). In the case of Benjamin, his childhood in a Chinese American family provides him with knowledge of the customs and memories of early Chinese immigrants, for example the Chinese food and the worship of Gwan Gung. In "Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic groups and Cultures in America," Herbert J. Gans calls these shared food or religious traditions "ethnic symbols." They are "frequently individual cultural practices that are taken from the older ethnic culture; they are 'abstract' from that culture and pulled out of its original moorings, so to speak, to become stand-ins for it. ... [So they are] characterized by a nostalgic allegiance to the culture of the immigrant generation, or that of the old country" (Gans 435-36). This nostalgic allegiance encourages Benjamin to study the history

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<sup>10</sup> Gwan Gung (关公 in Chinese) is a general living in the Three Kingdom Period (220–280 A.D.). His bravery and fighting skills made him a heroic figure worshiped by Chinese people.

of his cultural ancestors, follow Chinese eating habits and religious belief, and come to the New York's Chinatown to embrace the unique material culture and community embodied in this locale.

Benjamin visits New York's Chinatown six months after his father passed away. When he sits on the stoop of his father's birthplace, 13 Doyers Street, he feels somehow that he has returned home. He says, "I felt immediately that I had entered a world where all things were finally familiar" (Hwang, *Trying* 293). The scent of Chinese food and the residents' speech in various dialects produce an atmosphere that wraps Benjamin in a specifically Chinese ethnic community. What is more, this site becomes a bridge that connects him to his deceased father and ancestors. In his mind, this return symbolizes an embrace of his cultural roots and completes his ethnic identity.

However, in *Trying to Find Chinatown*, Hwang does not identify completely with Benjamin's culturological approach of defining Chinese American identity. Indeed, Ronnie, the play's other character, challenges Benjamin's point of view. As Esther Kim Lee summarizes, "Ronnie represents the growth and diversification of the Asian American population" (93). In Ronnie's opinion, cultural roots are not the only element that defines Chinese American identity, because both culture and identity are constantly changing. In contrast, Benjamin's excessive emphasis on cultural roots risks reducing Chinese American identity to a single dimension. In his essay "Ethnic Identity: Its Logical Foundations and its Dysfunctions," George Devereux points out that "an insistent and even obsessive stressing of and clinging to one's ethnic identity reveals a flaw in one's self-conception as a unique multidimensional entity" (412). Benjamin's over-insistence on Chinese American cultural roots leads him to ignore the fact that Ronnie too is Chinese American. In David Henry Hwang's play, Benjamin's perspective turns into another kind of stereotype. As Hwang remarks, "At its core, a stereotype is bad writing: a one- or two-dimensional cutout devoid of humanity, and therefore prone to demonization" ("A New" A16).

In effect, in the play, Ronnie attacks Benjamin's one-sided definition of Chinese American identity.

First of all, Ronnie does not think that Chinatown or its culture is able to define his identity. He does not worship Gwan Gung, nor does Chinatown tell "a thing about who [he is]" (Hwang, *Trying* 290). According to him, ethnic identity is not a simple composite based on a religious idol or a location. He questions Benjamin, "You think identity's that simple? That you can wrap it all up in a neat package and say, 'I have ethnicity, therefore I am'? All you fucking ethnic fundamentalists. Always settling for easy answers. You say you're looking for identity, but you can't begin to face the real mysteries of the search. So instead, you go skin-deep, and call it a day" (Hwang, *Trying* 291). Ronnie's words highlight the flaw in Benjamin's somewhat simplistic approach. When people are satisfied with such a definition, they stop their search for what identity really is, which is much more elusive and complex.

In fact, Hwang's creation of Ronnie alludes to the complexity of ethnic identity. Ronnie's character is a hybrid of past and present: "he is dressed in retro-'60s clothing and has a few requisite '90s body mutilations" (Hwang, *Trying* 285). His music is also a mixture of rock and jazz (Hwang, *Trying* 281). Even his electric violin is a combination of the classical and modern. All these details signify that one's ethnic identity is quite complex. Therefore, we need to keep looking for more dimensions, as if identity were an ongoing quest.

As Debbie Thompson suggests in his article "Is Race a Trope? Anna Deavere Smith and the Question of Race Performativity," identity "is not something that you have, but something that you do" (132). In other words, ethnic identity is not simply based on what one has already found—for example, a number of fixed semantic traits—but on the process of searching itself. In *Trying to Find Chinatown*, Benjamin finds his father's birthplace in the end. On the stoop of the house where his father was born, he sees, hears, and feels the Chinese American community around him and believes that he has found his ethnic home and the place where he belongs. But,

if Benjamin now feels he can stop searching, then he has, in effect, settled for a partial definition of ethnic identity. Moreover, although Benjamin thinks that his quest has reconnected him to his rightful community, does he really understand the people and their life in Chinatown? Does this return fully define Benjamin's ethnic identity, beyond proving that his father comes from there? Or is he just another tourist — as Hwang suggests in the stage direction, “a Midwestern tourist” — who knows the culture and history of Chinese Americans a little bit better than other tourists? Perhaps Benjamin's conversation with Ronnie ends up being more meaningful to him than what he has found at 13 Doyers Street.

Ronnie's quarrelsome point of view emphasizes another important aspect of ethnic identity: everyone has his own way of expressing it. Ronnie introduces himself to Benjamin with the words “Ronnie Chang. Otherwise known as ‘The Bow Man’” (Hwang, *Trying* 290). In this self-introduction, Ronnie gives his family name Chang, which implies his Chinese ancestry, although the color of his skin and his physical appearance have already suggested as much. He also stresses another equally significant part of his identity, he is a musician. For Ronnie, music is another way for him to express his identity, including his ethnicity. Herbert J. Gans notes that “ethnic identity can be expressed in either action or feeling, or combinations of these, and the kinds of situations in which it is expressed are nearly limitless” (434). Indeed, it is limiting to say that only ethnic heritage or physical milieu are able to capture the stuff of ethnic identity. This leads to another crucial point in Ronnie's interpretation of ethnic identity: it is individualistic and highly subjective.

In fact, both Ronnie and Benjamin choose what each considers the most suitable way for them to express and define their identity: one chooses music; the other his cultural roots. Both choices are valid as long as these conduits enable them to be themselves. To some degree, it is a matter of personal choice, a stance which partially contradicts Benjamin's belief in group identity. Benjamin thinks that by returning to the community, he can regain, or at least confirm,

his ethnic identity; while Ronnie abandons Chinatown and his community to find a way to present his own version of ethnic identity. In his essay “Dynamics of Ethnic Identification” published in 1958, Daniel Glazer defined “ethnic identification” as “a person’s use of racial, national or religious terms to identify himself, and thereby, to relate himself to others” (31). Although Glazer limits the factors of ethnic identification to race, nation, and religion, his emphasis on “personal choice” allows us to include music into an updated definition of ethnicity in today’s society.

Apart from its multi-dimensional and individualistic nature, Ronnie also believes that ethnic culture is developing and evolving all the time. He applies the development of jazz music as a metaphor to illustrate the changes of Chinese American identity; although some critics, such as Kim Esther Lee, choose to take the metaphor literally, seeing Ronnie as identifying his personal history with the history of music not ethnic identity (90-91). Jazz begins with the blues played by fiddlers (Hwang, *Trying* 291). This coincides with Benjamin’s belief in cultural roots, since he calls Ronnie’s electric violin a fiddle. Unlike Benjamin, whose perception of music does not go beyond his comment on the fiddles, Ronnie sees the development of jazz from blues to the ragtime and its later diversification in Europe. His electronic violin links him to modern jazz and is very different from the fiddles used in playing the first blues. David Henry Hwang explains in an interview with Asian Society that “we have a certain appreciation for our heritage... [but] that doesn’t completely define us people” (“Asians”). In other words, cultural roots alone cannot define Chinese Americans living in the present, because people and their identity change and evolve with the time. So it is problematic to judge later generations of Chinese Americans on the basis of the roots of the immigrant generation.

Still, Ronnie’s indulgence in jazz music does not mean that he has completely abandoned his ethnic identity or cultural roots. Although his music is not patently influenced by Chinese culture, it does not necessarily indicate his ethnic identity either. At one point he asks, “Does it

have to sound like Chinese opera before people like you decide I know who I am?" (Hwang, *Trying* 292). In other words, while Ronnie has a firm grasp of his ethnic identity, he does not have to perform it in front of other people to prove himself. At the same time, he does not want to let it restrain his individual development. Ronnie remarks, "you think if I deny the importance of my race, I'm nobody? There're worlds out there, worlds you haven't even begun to understand. Open your eyes. Hear with your ears" (Hwang, *Trying* 291). Here, Ronnie is asking Benjamin (and the audience of this play) to keep an open mind, to make contact with other people and really meet them, instead of judging people based on their ethnicity or other simplistic factors. Ronnie wants people to try to see other traits in him besides his Chinese American ethnicity.

At the end of the play, Ronnie resumes playing his electric violin. In the stage directions, Hwang provides an interesting description of Ronnie's music: "[D]oes it slowly begin to reflect the influence of Chinese music?" (Hwang, *Trying* 293). This implies that the Chinese heritage is always an intimate part of Ronnie's being, whether he is aware of it or not. His music now becomes a metaphor for a newer kind of Chinese American identity, a hybrid of American and Chinese influences. But the ending does not deny Benjamin's understanding of his ethnic identity either, because both characters remain present on the stage. After his monologue, "Benjamin sucks his salted plum and listens to the sounds around him. Ronnie continues to play. The two remain oblivious of one another" (Hwang, *Trying* 294). This scene symbolizes the simultaneous existence of the perspectives of the two characters. The sounds of Chinatown to which Benjamin listens include Ronnie's music. Benjamin's monologue segues into "the lyrics to Ronnie's violin melody" (Lee, *The Theatre* 91). This closing scene, in the eyes of the audience, unites the two characters. Although they may still disagree with each other, after this encounter, "Ronnie may be starting to reconsider his position on culture and race based on his conversation with Benjamin, and his music may, in turn, inspire Benjamin to rethink how he defines his own

identity” (Lee, *The Theatre* 92). This ending reflects David Henry Hwang’s idea of a multi-dimensional and evolving idea of Chinese American identity. Both characters begin to understand that there are other kinds of Chinese Americans and other ways of defining ethnic identity. Instead of mere physical appearance, there are so many other factors that can help to determine one’s ethnic identity.

Although Hwang acknowledges the perspectives of both Benjamin and Ronnie, he seems ever so slightly to prefer Ronnie’s. Both characters exemplify the positions of many second- and third-generation Chinese Americans. In the study “American Immigrant Groups: Ethnic Identification and the Problem of Generations,” Vladimir C. Nahirny notes that “the marginality of the sons made them acutely self-conscious and also highly sensitive to it [ethnic identity]; especially when passing through adolescence. Some of them became more ‘Yankeeized’ than the Yankees themselves; others turned into more ardent ethnics than their immigrant fathers had ever been” (277). In *Trying to Find Chinatown*, Ronnie and Benjamin’s attitudes represent these two extremes. While in real life, some Chinese Americans may have experienced both of them while growing up, which is the case of David Henry Hwang. The two characters in the play mirror Hwang’s own trajectory at different moments.

In his college years, Hwang was similar to Benjamin. Hwang calls it his “‘isolationist-nationalist’ phase, when he desired to relate only to other Asian Americans. He moved into an Asian American dorm; joined Bamboo, an all-Asian rock band that played Asian American protest music; and took courses in Chinese language and literature” (Boles, “David”). He embraced anything that emphasized his ethnicity. It was also from books that Hwang learned the history and culture of Chinese Americans. Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* and Frank Chin’s *Gee, Pop* inspired him to create his own work on Chinese Americans (Hwang, “Evolving” 16).

However, as he continued to grow up, Hwang came to identify more with Ronnie. The most obvious similarity between them is the experience of learning to play jazz on the violin. Hwang started to learn classical violin as a child from his mother (Marino 7). When he was in college, Hwang “learned to start improvising on violin and playing jazz and electric violin” (Marino 7). In addition to music, Ronnie must have grown up in a Westernized family, since he does not seem familiar with Gwan Gung and other aspects of Chinese American culture mentioned by Benjamin. Similarly, Hwang’s family was also distant from Chinese culture when he was young. Hwang reveals that “his family did not speak Chinese or celebrate Chinese holidays”, and it was not until high school that he figured out “when the Chinese New Year actually was” (Boles, “David”). More importantly, his later experiences help Hwang to form some of Ronnie’s ideas on ethnic identity. Hwang recalls:

I was raised with a mentality that was concerned with group identity and about doing things for the group. But I was also raised as an American, which is essentially about individual identity. So I know that personally the issue of the individual vs. community has been a struggle for me, so it would not be surprising if that came through one way or another in my plays. (Hwang and Lyons 235)

As I noted previously, Hwang illustrates this confrontation between group and individual identity in *Trying to Find Chinatown*. Benjamin leans towards the advantages of group identity and returns to the community, while Ronnie promotes an individual’s perspective and chooses to find his own way of expressing himself. Hwang has been through both stages, but seems to prefer Ronnie’s creative approach to identity. We can find support for this in Ronnie’s attack on Benjamin’s “fundamentalist” definition of Chinese American identity and Hwang’s own rebellion against the Christian fundamentalism in his family.

Hwang’s mother and the family members on her side were “devout Protestant fundamentalists” (Boles, *Understanding* 2). He too was educated to become one. After he went to college and gained access to a broader culture and worldview, he began to doubt his mother’s



Christian fundamentalism and eventually broke away from it. This experience is reflected in two of Hwang's plays, *Family Devotions* and *Golden Child*. According to Hwang, the first one is "a very angry indictment of the Christian fundamentalist mindset" and the second "an anti-fundamentalist play in the largest sense—that is, against any belief system that casts things in black or white" (Berson 15). In fact, not only in these two plays, but rather in most of his plays, Hwang criticizes this mindset of demonizing people who hold a different point of view. Hwang remarks, "I have spent most of my adulthood writing about identity confusion... The more I have explored characters caught in these maelstroms, the less willing I have become to pass judgement on difficult human choices. Simultaneously, the more saddened I have become by the human tendency to cling to fundamentalisms" ("Worlds" 50). He continues to explain that "for me, a belief becomes fundamentalist when those who question it become the enemy, the heretic" (Hwang, "Worlds" 51). In *Trying to Find Chinatown*, Ronnie calls Benjamin and people like him "ethnic fundamentalists," because they always settle for "easy answers" (Hwang 291). They believe that they are the only orthodox Chinese Americans, all others who do not follow their standards are, in Benjamin's words, "lost souls" (Hwang, *Trying* 293).

Clearly, Hwang is challenging those fundamentalist standards of defining Chinese American identity in *Trying to Find Chinatown*. Does one have to be knowledgeable about one's history and cultural roots to be a Chinese American? Does a Chinese American have to have all the traits mentioned in those academic books on ethnicity? Are those books and cultural roots the sole standards by which to judge one's ethnic identity? No doubt, Hwang's answers are negative. He emphasizes in an interview that "the romanticization, the glorification of the root culture just seems very simplistic to me now, a kind of high school mentality—our team versus their team. Real life is far more complicated than that" (Berson 18). Many touchstones of Chinese American heritage, such as railroad workers and Gwan Gung, have the potential of over-simplifying Chinese American identity. What about those who are not descendants of railroad workers and

Gwan Gung worshipers? Hwang refers to these ethnic cultural roots as “mythologies” (“Making” 235). People like Benjamin “take on various mythologies and try to find themselves in relation to those mythologies, almost as if the search for identity is so difficult and complex that it is easier to hang your hat on a preestablished identity and try to have that become you or you become that thing” (Hwang, “Making” 235). However, those mythologies are static and simplified, while in real life people and their culture are evolving and diversified.

In his article “Ethnic Groups and Boundaries,” Fredrik Barth argues, “The cultural features that signal the boundary may change, and the cultural characteristics of the members may likewise be transformed, indeed, even the organizational form of the group may change” (300). In other words, since the cultural boundaries of an ethnic group change, the boundaries of defining their ethnic identities change as well. David Henry Hwang shares this view when he says that “culture is constantly changing. And so culture constantly changes, notions of race constantly change, notions of identity constantly change. Everything is an evolution” (Selim 126). Therefore, it is problematic to use the cultural roots of the immigrant generation to judge the evolving Chinese American individual and the Chinese Americans as a group.

Too much emphasis on cultural roots can turn them into ethnic stereotypes. Hwang writes that “one era’s cultural breakthroughs may calcify and become stereotypes through time” (“A New” A16). The belief that all Chinese Americans today are descendants of railroad workers or laundrymen is a new form of stereotype. The worst part of this phenomenon is that often Chinese Americans themselves are the perpetrators. So how do we solve the problem?

Probably the fundamental problem lies in the creation of ethnic identity. In other words, why do we use ethnicity to define identity? According to George Devereux, traditionally speaking, ethnic identity is “simply a label or sorting device” that “does not presuppose, at least in theory, the existence of ethnic sub-identities” (392). It is used to judge and isolate one set of people from another and does not consider the many identity features within each individual. Ulf

Hannerz gives an even stricter definition: it is “primarily a social-organizational phenomenon, a matter of drawing boundaries between groups on the basis of a combination of criteria of ascription and diacritical cultural markers and thus channeling interaction” (418). The definitions of these scholars provide us with a general picture of ethnic identity. It is a socially constructed sorting device that draws boundaries between different groups; and it is a combination of criteria that all group members should meet in order to belong. From this definition, we can see that perhaps ethnic identity is created as a factor of group identity and does not focus on a person’s individuality.

However, people in today’s world of diversification would question this way of defining ethnic identity. Hwang points out that “with increasing bi- and multiracialism among our children, with the expanding diversity of Asian Americans among us, the boundaries of our community have become blurred” (“Facing” xi). Since this kind of social construct reduces people to labels and categories based on ethnicity, it does not meet this generation’s need for diversity as individual human beings. On the other hand, since ethnic identity, such as “Chinese American” or “Asian American,” is largely a social construct, we can always deconstruct, redefine or even destroy it completely (Fans 453). In fact, David Henry Hwang has been working hard to deconstruct the reductive label “Asian American” for a long time. He claims that “My generation... invented the term ‘Asian American’. And part of me longs for the next generation of Asian artists to transcend that label, to redefine it, or to blur it out of existence. In short, to do what young people are supposed to do: kill their parents” (Hwang, “Worlds” 55). *Trying to Find Chinatown* is one of his many attempts to blur the labels of ethnic identity. Benjamin refuses to be judged by genes and skin color; Ronnie jumps beyond the bounds of cultural roots. As Esther Kim Lee remarks in *The Theatre of David Henry Hwang*, “with Ronnie and Benjamin, Hwang envisions what some would call a post-racial society, one in which racial identity are incidental,

not essential” and the notion of Chinese American identity “might perhaps be unnecessary in the future” (92-93).

In his essay “Facing the Mirror” David Henry Hwang writes that “definitions of race are meaningless, except as a reaction to the meaningless racism of society as a whole” (xii). All the causes of racism and ethnic stereotyping come from the creation and definition of race and ethnicity. Hwang is always tagged as an ethnic playwright who writes about Chinese and Asian American issues. Yet this emphasis on ethnicity restrains Hwang’s creation as a playwright *per se*. Hwang protests, “I... don’t want to be labeled, and I agree that Asian-American theatre should be everything and can be anything. Still, the reality is that these people say, ‘No—you have to have a pagoda on stage’”; and even “the government wants us to be Asian-American. And the more-Asian-than-American the better, so that they will fund us” (Hong, “Through” 82). Hwang’s words reveal a ubiquitous phenomenon in American literature: there is the mainstream white American literature which is for everyone, and then there is ethnic literature for the various ethnic groups; and ethnic writers should write about ethnic topics. This phenomenon itself is inherently racist and based on cultural stereotyping. Hwang further argues, “I think that actually really all American theatre is ethnic theater to some degree, that even if you have Tennessee Williams for instance, writing primarily about whites in the South, that a lot of writers derive their authenticity from focusing on a particular group and then drawing the universality from those particular specifics” (“Evolving” 17). The point is, the category and the term “ethnic theatre” are problematic and meaningless, and of limited use.

Although it is too unrealistic for us to play down the notion of ethnicity as a category of social analysis and examination of identity, Hwang insists on trying to go beyond the boundaries of ethnic theatre and challenge current displays of ethnic identity. He continues to try out new topics, even those having nothing to do with Chinese or Asian American issues. In his words, “we must feel free to question anything, say anything, without fear of being labeled

heretical” (“Worlds” 51). Since old stereotypes still exist and new ones continue to emerge, we still need to keep an open mind and wage the battle over ethnic identity.

#### 4.5. Li-Young Lee’s *The Winged Seed*: the Winged Identity

In the previous part of this chapter, I have discussed David Henry Hwang’s ideas on Chinese American identity and ethnic identity in general. To sum up, Hwang believes that Chinese American identity, like ethnic identities in general, is individualistic, multidimensional, and continuously evolving. His perspective focuses especially on the construction and definition of ethnicity. In this part, I will continue to explore the themes of Chinese migrant and Chinese American identity by focusing in particular on the elusive nature of identity itself. I will discuss Chinese American poet Li-Young Lee’s handling of migrant identity from his memoir *The Winged Seed: A Remembrance*. This narrative, published in 1995, retells the moving diasporic history of Lee’s family and his reflections on the formation of his own identity status. Although the refugee experience of the Lee’s family is not shared by many Chinese immigrants, his interpretation of migrant identity as a winged seed — a symbol of inheritance, rebirth, mobility, and transformation— encourages us to look at Chinese migrant and Chinese ethnic identity from a different perspective.

Li-Young Lee was born in 1957 in Jakarta, Indonesia, in a prestigious Chinese migrant family (Marshall 129). His mother Jiaying was the granddaughter of the first president of Republic of China, Yuan Shikai (Williamson 1). Li-Young Lee’s father, Kuo Yuan Lee, came from a wealthy merchant family. Kuo Yuan once served as Mao Zedong’s personal physician before the latter became the chairman of the People’s Republic of China (Jensen 1). However, due to his belief in Christianity, which was not favored by the Communist regime in China at that time, in 1949 Kuo Yuan fled to Indonesia with his family and became a priest and a professor at Gamaliel University (Williamson 1). In 1959, Achmad Sukarno, the country’s

Muslim president, organized an anti-Chinese and anti-Western campaign during which Kuo Yuan was sentenced to jail under the charge of preaching and spying for America (Chau, "Rose" 1). In 1963, while being transported by ship from Indonesia to another detention center in Macau, the Lees escaped to Hong Kong with the help of Kuo Yuan's students. Kuo Yuan worked as a prominent preacher for one year in Hong Kong and then left for America with his family. After studying at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary for three years, Kuo Yuan became a priest in Pennsylvania (Steele 01E). Li-young Lee was six years old at this time (Steele 01E). Once in America, the Lee family again struggled to adapt to a new environment.

The legendary diasporic experience of Li-Young Lee's family is the theme of *The Winged Seed*. In fact, before its publication, Lee had already written two award-winning poetry collections on the themes of exile, immigration, and family: *Rose* (1986) and *The City in Which I Love You* (1990). In *The Winged Seed*, we have a comprehensive view of Lee's family history and a more detailed representation of the theme of migrant and ethnic identity. The image of a winged seed in the title symbolizes a highly mobile and transformative version of migrant identity. Lee describes the winged seed as "born flying, flew, knowing nothing else, ... [f]rom unrest to unrest, it [i]s moving" (*The Winged* 92). It is not stationary or tied down to any single geographic location and culture. This description represents the way Lee sees himself as a migrant writer of boundless possibilities.

Some scholars have analyzed Li-Young Lee's work within a strictly Chinese or Chinese American cultural framework. For example, L. Ling-chi Wang and Henry I-heng Chao claim that Lee's work boils "down to a pursuit of certain Chinese ideas, or Chinese memories" (xv). In their introduction to *Chinese American Poetry: An Anthology*, they attempt to demonstrate that Lee writes in the style of Chinese classical poetry. Another Chinese scholar, Yibing Huang considers *The Winged Seed* as "a typical fable of Asian American experience, of how tradition and the parents' generation are always, in consciousness or the unconscious, linked with pain and

burden" (190). These comments are rather reductive if we consider Li-Young Lee's thoughts on migrant identity, because they ignore so many other aspects presented in Lee's memoir— such as his account of family's diasporic experience in Indonesia and his incomprehension of Yuan Shikai's feudal China (Lee, *The Winged* 18). Just because Lee's parents were born in China does not mean that Li-Young Lee's work is completely imbued by Chinese culture. As a matter of fact, Lee is "not interested in identifying himself as an Asian-American poet" either (Johnson, "Li-Young" 1). In an interview with Tod Marshall titled "To Witness the Invisible: A Talk with Li-Young Lee," Lee remarks that writing poetry is "the realization of my identity and that identity as the universe. I am perfectly convinced that that's what I am, the universe" (130). In other words, he believes that only his work and poetry can speak for himself; they make up his universe. This universe transcends the boundaries of ethnicity, nationality, and geography, and symbolizes the freedom to create and exist. And we should note, this freedom again coincides with the image of a winged seed.

In *The Winged Seed*, the image of the Lees' migrant identity as a shifting and mobile process confirms the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy's theory on the inherent volatility of identity. In *Identité: Fragments, Franchises*, Nancy writes, «on n'entre pas dans une identité, on ne s'en revote pas, et on se saurait s'identifier à elle sans en même temps la modifier, la modaliser, la transformer peut-être. Les identités ne sont jamais si purement fixes, ni simplement plastiques. Elles sont toujours métastables»<sup>11</sup> (23). According to Nancy, in other words, there are no pre-existing categories of identity. Secondly, when people try to attach themselves to specific identities, they are also at the same time changing those identities. Thirdly, identity is a dynamic

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<sup>11</sup> "one does not enter an identity, one does not don one, and one cannot identify with one (assuming that to treat it as an entity or a figure is meaningful) without at the same time modifying it, modalizing it, perhaps transforming it. Identities are never purely static, nor simply plastic. They are always metastatic." Translated by François Raffoul.

process of transformation and modalization influenced by context. Below I will explain in detail Nancy's ideas on identity as they are represented in Li-Young Lee's *The Winged Seed*.

The image of a winged seed in the title reveals two qualities of migrant identity: one, it is a seed that contains the past and the potential to grow in the future; two, it is incessantly “on-the-wing” — in constant movement. The first quality suggests that the seed of identity inherits the genes from its original fruit; and the seed will carry genes throughout its future life. In *The Winged Seed*, Kuo Yuan answers his son's question about the meaning of a seed. He says, it is “remembrance” (Lee, *The Winged Seed* 33). Remembrance reconnects immigrants and migrants to their ancestors and heritage and this helps to shape their current and future identity. In the memoir, Lee learned to write his parents' names in Chinese characters when he was little. This learning process is a form of remembrance that links the author to the Chinese culture of his parents.

In his book *Identité*, Jean-Luc Nancy argues that «l'identité se réclame à la fois d'elle-même et d'un lignage; ou plus exactement: elle est elle-même son lignage»<sup>12</sup> (33). In other words, one's identity is composed of one's inseparable lineage. One's lineage remains part of one's identity regardless of any effort to forget it. In *The Winged Seed*, there is a scene when the Lees are leaving China for Indonesia which has a symbolic value. They had burned Kuo Yuan's “papers, notebooks, manuscripts, photographs, and letters” in order to destroy that traumatic past; yet “one hot mote shot out and creased [the] youngest brother's thigh, ... His leg owns the scar to this day” (Lee, *The Winged* 34). This scar on the son's leg may be taken to symbolize the Lee family's lineage and past. No matter how hard the son tries to erase it, the scar will remain, reminding him of its significance until the end of his life.

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<sup>12</sup> “Identity relies both on itself and on a lineage. More exactly: it is itself its own lineage.” Translated by François Raffoul.



In addition to the significance of lineage, the seed image of migrant identity also suggests that it is not yet complete but is in the process of becoming. Even when the Lees eventually arrive in America, they are still like seeds that continue to be nourished by the culture, language, and “soil” of their habitat. In Lee’s words, it is “a morning glory seed” and “carries news of a new continent and our first citizenship” (*The Winged* 36). Morning, new continent, and first citizenship all symbolize another starting point rather than a destination. As Jean-Luc Nancy writes, «tu ne l’es pas, ce que tu es, tu as à le devenir et rien ne t’est donné pour cela puisque ce que tu es n’est nulle part ailleurs qu’au terme de ton devenir»<sup>13</sup> (34-35). One’s present state does not stand for his true identity, but is only a phase in an ongoing process of transformation.

Let us now turn to the second quality of the winged seed: its mobile and uprooted nature. Throughout *The Winged Seed*, the Lee family is in a continuous state of displacement and alienation. In Indonesia, the parents are uprooted from their Chinese heritage and cannot speak the local dialect. The father was sent to prison because he was preaching foreign ideas. Although the children speak the Javanese language, most of the time they are not allowed to go beyond their yard, due to the hatred of and violence against people of Chinese origin. Clearly, the family does not feel at home in Indonesia. After passing through Hong Kong, Japan, and Singapore, they land on American soil but still have a difficult time fitting into American culture and society. This homeless state produces fear in the hearts of Li-Young Lee and his siblings. After watching the plays about the corpseherds searching and herding dead bodies seeking to return home, the children fear that they “would be mistaken for a dead one and herded away” (Lee, *The Winged* 126). In the old days, travelers and soldiers often died far from home. Their families would hire corpseherds to find their bodies and bring them back. In these plays, Li-Young Lee

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<sup>13</sup> “you are not what you are, you have to become it and nothing is given to you for this purpose since what you are is nowhere but at the end of your becoming.” Translated by François Raffoul.

and his siblings consider their own life and future to be like those of the lost souls. They wander without a home until the end of their life.

However, a winged seed is born to fly with the wind. It may land in some places for a while; but once the wind comes, it will start its journey again. Similarly, Jean-Luc Nancy writes about identity, «c'est le point de chute... d'où part un tracé»<sup>14</sup> (42). It is a landing point where infinite possibilities begin. In *The Winged Seed*, Lee summarizes the journey of a winged seed as follows: “the nature of moving is collecting” (*The Winged* 39). During its journey, the seed collects the sunshine, the rain, the air and turns them into itself. What is collected provides nutrition for the seed to grow. But this journey will never lead the seed back to the tree where it was born. Lee writes, we live “with the no-longer-there” (*The Winged* 152), and “there is no stopping, only proceedings and turnings. And there is no going back” (136). Although remaining a part of the tree, the seed is no longer attached to it. And even if it were, the tree itself would not be the same any more. In short, the only option left is to keep flying and take on ever newer shapes.

After discussing the two qualities of migrant identity as a winged seed, let me now examine the driving force that propels it— the wind. In *The Winged Seed*, Li-Young Lee compares himself to the seed that his “father kept in the pocket of his suit” (56). This memoir is his exploration of the driving forces that shape his and his family’s identity. Through a close reading of the text, we can identify at least three major forces: social context, human relationships, and language. These factors also represent the central issues in the first two chapters of this dissertation: immigrants’ social background, family relationship, and language. Lee has incorporated all three of them into his family memoir. Let us now see how social context, human relationships, and language influence the direction of the memoir’s notion of a winged identity.

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<sup>14</sup> “Identity is the landing point...from where a path can begin.” Translated by François Raffoul.

Let us start from how the narrator shows social context affecting the identity of Lee and his family in *The Winged Seed*. Since social context is a very broad concept, we will focus on its historical and political aspects. During the Lees' migration from China, Indonesia, and Hong Kong to America, each place is endowed with its unique social context at certain historical moments. These moments affect the formation of the family members' identities and the direction of their next move. The German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer points out that "[t]he historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never absolutely bound to any one standpoint, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon. The horizon is, rather, something into which we move and that moves with us. Horizons change for a person is moving" (304). Whenever one moves to a new place, the historical and political movements there will tend to lead that person to a wider and newer horizon of both the world and self.

In *The Winged Seed*, before the Lees left China, this society was still feudal and patriarchal. The teachings of Confucius on virtue and family forge Kuo Yuan's "unshakable and ridiculous sense of filial piety" (Lee, *The Winged Seed* 174). Although Kuo Yuan hated how his father mistreated his family by starving and beating them (Lee, *The Winged Seed* 156-57), he inherited the duty of filial piety and brought it with him to America. Only two days after the Lees arrive in America, Kuo Yuan forces his children to live with his father for two weeks so as to fulfill the responsibility of being a son (Lee, *The Winged Seed* 174). Of course, the Lees' exodus from China to Indonesia was the result of another social transformation in China. The Communist Party won the civil war in 1949 and established a new regime, the People's Republic of China. As a "heathen" Christian, Kuo Yuan is forced to leave with his family in order to escape political consequences.

Soon after the Lees arrived in Indonesia, another political upheaval takes place and affects their identity and future once more. From 1957 to 1966, the Indonesian president Achmad Sukarno, "had instituted his 'Guided Democracy' (with himself as 'Guide') in Indonesia and was

fanning flames of anti-Chinese sentiment by blaming his country's economic woes on its Chinese inhabitants" (Chua, "The Winged") and Western "imperialism" (Pauker 503). This anti-Chinese and anti-Western movement eventually led to Kuo Yuan's imprisonment in 1959 (Chua, "Rose"), under the charge of being a CIA spy and spreading Western ideas. In Indonesia Kuo Yuan was labeled a political criminal. Events there also affected Kuo Yuan's family. They had "become pariahs, ... Even friends stopped coming by" (Lee, *The Winged* 107). This wealthy and prestigious family suddenly became identified as the enemy. Their Chinese background reinforced the image of them as intruders among local Javanese people. The Javanese believed that Chinese immigrants came to take over local businesses and establish colonies. Some Javanese even created an ice storm to force the Lees to sell their house and leave (Lee, *The Winged Seed* 128). The social context in Indonesia was such that the Lees were forced to migrate to America and form yet another life.

The second driving force of the Lees' shifting identity concerns human relationships. Human beings never exist as isolated individuals. As Jean-Luc Nancy points out, «L'humanité ne commence pas avec un couple originaire, mais avec un groupe et comme un groupe. Ou mieux, sans doute, comme plusieurs groupes»<sup>15</sup> (53). Nancy calls it the «la loi des existences en général: la pluralité et le rapport, sans lesquels on ne voit pas même ce qu' 'exister' voudrait dire»<sup>16</sup> (53). Since human beings are group animals, it is meaningless to discuss individual identity without associating it to others. For example, how others perceive you and how you affect others. Li-Young Lee writes, "we were transparent. After all, we existed only when someone saw us" (*The Winged* 106). The connection and interaction between individuals help to shape our identities and existence. During

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<sup>15</sup> "Humanity does not begin with an original couple, but with a group, and as a group. Or better, no doubt, as several groups." Translated by François Raffoul.

<sup>16</sup> "the law of existences in general: plurality and relation, without which one could not even see what 'to exist' could mean." Translated by François Raffoul.

their journey of migration, immigrants constantly build up unstable and multifaceted human relationships with others. These relationships assist the formation of immigrants' identities.

One of the main focuses of *The Winged Seed* is the father-and-son relation of the Lees. Kuo Yuan plays a significant role in every stage of his son's life. He stands as the icon of Chinese feudal hierarchy when Li-Young is little. He is the source of Li-Young's perception of China and his Chinese ancestry. The imprisonment of Kuo Yuan in Indonesia left a void in Li-Young's adolescent heart. The search for father stays with Li-Young for the rest of his life even after Kuo Yuan passes away. Later, Kuo Yuan's preaching in America help forge Li-Young's Christian worldview. Like a guide on his life journey, Kuo Yuan presents his son with different sides of the world and themselves. "There was ever only one book: the one my father used to teach me to read." writes Lee, "Called by him The World" (*The Winged* 58). This book is the Bible which opens the world of Christianity, but also the world of migrants.

One of the symbols that connects father and son in *The Winged Seed* is their shared blood. Developing this theme, Kuo Yuan shows his son the past of an immigrant: "When my father was a boy in China, that country was already old. ... And all my father was born to was already worn out and passed to him, including his name, my blood. Especially his blood. Blood was the oldest thing and coursed inside him" (Lee, *The Winged* 175). In his father's blood there flows the old China, which also flows into Li-Young. In this sense Li-Young "was one of those seeds [his] father kept in the pocket of his suit" (Lee, *The Winged* 56). As a migrant, Kuo Yuan is a flying seed seeking a place to take root and grow. After he passed away, his unfinished mission of searching is passed on to his seeds, his children.

In *The Winged Seed*, Kuo Yuan's shoes become another symbol signifying the handing over of his unfinished search. At the beginning of the memoir, in Li-Young's dream, he saw his father walking towards him in those wrecked shoes and he keeps looking at them (*The Winged* 12). Later, when Li-Young wakes up, he notices that he is "wearing the same shoes" as his father (Lee, *The*

*Winged* 66). In fact, his father's shoes had carried him from continent to continent. When Kuo Yuan left the world, his shoes are passed on to Li-Young so that he can continue the journey forward. The shoes embody the identity of these migrants who walk for their whole life and pass on what they are to the future generations.

In addition to the father-and-son relation, another is developed between the preacher and his congregation. Preaching was Kuo Yuan's life-long vocation, no matter if he was in Indonesia or Hong Kong or America. In his sermons, Kuo Yuan enlightens his congregation about life and world, because many of them are not integrated to the society. For example, in America, Kuo Yuan's congregation is made up of shut-ins, the elderly, the sick, and those deserted by their family and community. Kuo Yuan's visits and sermons are identical to "hundreds of dandelion seeds [that] float slowly over the valley, each carrying a spark of the late sun, each turned to gold by what it bore from one side of the river to the other" (Lee, *The Winged* 36). Kuo Yuan brings care and hope to those helpless people and is closely connected to his congregation. Of course, this in return changes Kuo Yuan's identity in the eyes of his American parishioners. In fact, when the Lees first arrived in the Pennsylvania town to start their new life, they "experienced anti-Asian prejudice" (Johnson 1). The congregation called the newly arrived Kuo Yuan "their heathen minister", due to his skin color (Lee, *The Winged* 82). However, Kuo Yuan's heartwarming visits and sermons, especially his heroic act of saving Mrs. Cook's life, change the congregation's view of him. From being an alien, he becomes his congregation's savior.

The third driving force that shapes the Lees is language. When they arrived in America, no one in the family could speak English except Kuo Yuan. Li-Young had a difficult time in school while learning the language. Due to his accent, he is told "more than once" that he "sounded ugly"; and it becomes "a shame" to him (Lee, *The Winged* 76). This linguistic obstacle isolates him from his peers. He "avoided as much as possible any contact with native English speakers" and "said as little as possible" (Lee, *The Winged* 78). Thus, he "made no friends who didn't come from" his

neighborhood of foreigners for many years (Lee, *The Winged* 78). On the other hand, he makes many friends with other immigrant children and “chose friends by how they talked” (Lee, *The Winged* 133). In the memoir, language distances immigrants from the native speakers but also unites immigrants speaking different tongues.

Stuart Hall argues that “we all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific” (392). How we use our language reflects our background and worldview. In America, the Lees face hostility because of their foreign accent. However, in Indonesia, language again changes their identity, but in a different form— folk tales. In *The Winged Seed*, the Javanese use folk tales to explain the creation of the world and human beings, their history, life and death, and all the mysterious phenomena in nature. In the eyes of Jiaying, a traditional Chinese woman brought up in a wealthy royal family, these old tales are only “idle gossips” and “superstition”, not to be taken seriously (Lee, *The Winged Seed* 121). Yet her children, who were born and grew up on this island, believe them whole heartedly. They speak Javanese with the natives and call it “our language”, while their mother “spoke Chinese to [them], spoke the adults’ language” (Lee, *The Winged Seed* 122). This language distinction leads the children to identify with the local islanders rather than with their own mother. These Javanese tales subtly affect the worldview of these young migrants. They “were convinced ... that our island of cities and rice fields, forests, rivers, and volcanoes was The World” (Lee, *The Winged Seed* 123). They begin to share with the worldview of the native Java islanders after listening to their tales. This transformation again suggests that language is capable of shaping how one sees the world and himself.

Li-Young Lee compares the above three aspects— social context, human relationship, and language— to the function of wind carrying a winged seed. They help form the immigrants’ mobile identity. Besides wind, Lee also introduces three other symbols to complete the journey of the winged seed: sun, night, and earth.

In the Chinese language, the pronunciation of the character for sun (日) is R. In *The Winged Seed*, when the young Li-Young is learning the Chinese character for sun, he tries to relate all kinds of objects to R, the sun, including his name Yang (阳), which means the sun (Lee, *The Winged* 46). The sun in his name becomes a symbol of his identity. As Jean-Luc Nancy writes, «L'identité exige le nom»<sup>17</sup> (33). By naming a person, you give him an identity. Li-Young Lee's search for the sun signifies the search for his identity. On the other hand, the sun powers all movement. It produces the wind which carries the winged seed along its journey. At the same time, it provides energy for the seed's growth. For the migrant and ethnic subject, the sun symbolizes the quest for identity. This quest drives them to keep searching while they continue to change.

The image of night appears repeatedly in *The Winged Seed* as well. In the memoir, Lee constantly dreams of his family history at night. Night symbolizes a link to the past. Lee writes, when a migrant is not dreaming at night, he is “weighing for himself seeds and forgetfulness, the white grains of his insomnia and the weight of the whole night, must begin to suspect he is of no particular origin” (*The Winged* 55). By reflecting on his past, he realizes that his identity derives from multiple origins, because he has wandered so long and so far. Gadamer notes that “our own past and the other past toward which our historical consciousness is directed help to shape this moving horizon out of which human life always lives and which determines it as heritage and tradition” (304). As migrants travel, their heterogeneous past enriches and refreshes their identity and horizon of the world. As Lee writes in *The City in Which I Love You*, “memory revises me” (14). By evoking his memory, Lee understands how identity is formed in the present. Thus, the night does not represent a static state to the winged seed. Rather, as a harbinger of the sun, the night connects its past to whatever lies ahead — in Lee's words, “a morning glory seed” (*The Winged* 36).

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<sup>17</sup> “Identity demands the name.” Translated by François Raffoul.



In *The Winged Seed*, the earth is both the starting point and final destination of a winged seed: “Only to begin its longest journey to find its birthplace, that place of eternal unrest. From unrest to unrest it was moving” (Lee 92). The seed hears “a call coming from its birthplace, realm of its first day, a call coming from behind it, prior, as it were, to the seed itself” (Lee, *The Winged* 92). But it is impossible for the seed to return to its original earth, because the wind carries it away. The winged seed reaches the end of its journey when it lands and takes roots in the earth. Only at this point, will the seed no longer fly. The black seeds in Kuo Yuan’s pockets are buried together with him in the earth. The black color of these seeds signifies the end of Kuo Yuan’s life. The return of these seeds to the earth, along with Kuo Yuan’s body, also symbolizes the end of a migrant's journey. Only when one dies and is returned to the earth is his shifting identity finally stilled.

In Lee’s poem “Mnemonic”, he gives a new interpretation of the earth and its significance to migrants:

The earth is flat. Those who fall off don't return.  
The earth is round. All things reveal themselves to men only gradually. (32)

Here, the earth means both the soil and the globe. The flat earth is the soil beneath our feet. Once one dies and is buried in the ground, he cannot come back to life. The earth finalizes the transformation of his identity. The round earth is the globe where migrants travel. On their journeys, they begin to understand the world and themselves gradually. To the winged seed, the whole globe is its earth and is full of possibilities.

Apart from its themes and symbols, the structure of *The Winged Seed* also reflects the migrant’s fluid identity. The whole book is “a complex fabric made up, on the one hand, of a highly subjective psychological history about the formation of dominant themes and images in a poetic imagination that is woven, on the other hand, with factual history of world events” (Chua, “The Winged” 1). Li-Young Lee fuses together family reminiscence and historical context, dreams and realities in a narrative of highly poetic prose. This hybrid format enhances the complex composition

of the migrant identity. As the literary critic Zhou points out, “the renewal of the self is accompanied by a renewal of the traditional poetic form and language” (“Inheritance” 131). The memoir does not follow the traditional chronological order of retelling the Lee's family history. Instead, Lee juxtaposes past and present together in a free-flowing poetic narrative. For example, narrating his father's imprisonment in Indonesia, he then quickly jumps to future events in America.

This narrative technique of stream-of-consciousness nicely mirrors the fluid identity of the immigrants and the metaphorical journey of a winged seed. Identity formation does not follow an already existing path, rather its journey is defined by contingency. In an interview, Lee remarked, “I’ve noticed that we can’t be free of stereotypes as long as we’re thinking with our rational mind. So it was important for me to take a breath and then go under . . . to try to escape all stereotypical views of what an Asian is in America, what an immigrant is. . . . The only way I could escape those stereotypes was to defy my own rational thinking” (Cheung, *Words* 275). The free-flowing style of *The Winged Seed* enables Lee to represent the unstable nature of identity and break through the stereotypes of Chinese immigrants. This style helps to free the Lee family’s migrant identity from existing categories and stereotypes. Both the narration and the migrant identity are constantly changing.

In *The Winged Seed*, Li-Young Lee skillfully displays his understanding of migrant identity. The title of his memoir captures in a single metaphor the diasporic life of the Lee family and the shifting nature of migrant identity. The non-chronological narrative weaves together personal memories and historical facts, past and present. The stream-of-consciousness style represents the unstable and often discontinuous nature of migrant identity. The Lees are forced to change their identity again and again under the influence of different social contexts, human relationships, and languages. Like a handful of winged seeds, these migrants recollect the past during the nights and embrace the future under the sun. Due to their lack of attachment to a single place, this migrants’ family continues to build various hybrid identities until they reach the end of their life, the earth.

However, in today's world, travel and mobility are not restricted to immigrants only. The transportation revolution and new technologies turn almost everyone into migrants. In this sense, we all are winged seeds.

## **Chapter 5. Conclusion**

In this dissertation, I have analyzed the migrant experience of Chinese immigrants in North America through their representations in literature and photography. In each of the three chapters, I focused on three major ethnic issues affecting the lives and identity of Chinese immigrants and their offspring in North America: the first concerns the ways in which occupation, home, and family affect the destinies of Chinese immigrants; the second deals with the role of language in the lives of Chinese immigrants and the career of Chinese migrant writers; the third, with stereotypes of Chinese immigrants and their offspring and the redefinition of their identity. In this interdisciplinary study, literature inspires us to picture verbally Chinese immigrants' struggles under the discriminatory laws and prejudices of society, and their endeavors to gain respect and equal rights. Meanwhile, photography provides ample visual evidence complements the literary representations.

I have chosen to study the literary works by Frank Chin, Maxine Hong Kingston, Qiu Xiaolong, Ha Jin, Fae Myenne Ng, David Henry Hwang, Li-Young Lee, Wayson Choy, and Ying Chen. All of them are pivotal figures and explorers of contemporary Chinese ethnic literature in the United States and Canada. Their work helps to describe a multifaceted history of the Chinese immigrants in North America from the late nineteenth century to the present. Along with the study of Chinese American photographers, Mary Tape, Benjamin Chinn, Corky Lee, and Wing Young Huie, I have added a discussion of the work of two American photographers, Arnold Genthe and George Grantham Bain. The contrasting views that emerge help to illuminate the processes of stereotyping as well as identity construction. The work of the Americans focuses on the immigrants' "Chineseness", while that of the Chinese Americans seeks to present Chinese immigrant life and the fight for equality from within the Chinese American community. My objective in studying the work of these writers and photographers has been to bring further attention to the difficulties and challenges facing the Chinese ethnic group in North America.

In Chapter 2, I have analyzed how backgrounds and social conditions affect Chinese immigrants' lives in North America from two thematic perspectives: that of occupation and that of home and family. These thematic categories are among the most significant factors shaping the fate of Chinese immigrants and their children. In the section describing occupations, I have examined Arnold Genthe's photographs of San Francisco's Chinatown from the 1890s to the 1930s. By researching the legal and demographic history of Chinese immigrants at the turn of the century and Arnold Genthe's photographs side-by-side, I have found that the early Chinese immigrants lived very diverse lives due to their distinct occupations. On the one hand, there were the wealthy merchants who worked in the importation and exportation business; and on the other, those who worked in the agricultural and fishing industry and other menial jobs. Meanwhile, the Page Act (1875) and the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) strictly limited the entry of Chinese women, unless they were the wives of the well-to-do merchants. In Chinatown's bachelor society, house servants and prostitutes were common jobs for the poor Chinese female immigrants. The wives of the wealthy merchants stayed indoors to take care of the family and rarely stepped out of their houses. Arnold Genthe's photographs helped us to piece together the diverse occupational conditions of these early Chinese immigrants.

However, Genthe's photographs only show the superficial side of Chinatown and its residents at the turn of the century: the perspective is that of a curious American tourist. My discussion of Ha Jin's story collection *A Good Life* and Wing Young Huie's photographs reveals both the development of Chinese immigrants' occupational conditions and the often neglected economic struggles of less advantaged immigrants. In this interdisciplinary study, the varied literary and photographic representations of the Chinese immigrants have allowed us to study topics as separate as the restaurant businesses, street vendors, and kung fu masters. Ha Jin's stories and Wing Young Huie's photographs express the two artists' understanding of and respect for those silent Chinese immigrants caught in low-wage, dead-end jobs. Similar to immigrants from other nations, these

disadvantaged workers struggle “to make [their] way slowly from the lowest strata of unskilled labor up to a level where it satisfie[s] the accredited norms of social success” (Bourne 94).

Of course, there are exceptions: the fugitive government officials and businessmen from China formed a new type of immigrant in North America. I have tried to shed some light on their luxurious yet secretive life in my discussion of Qiu Xiaolong’s novel *A Case of Two Cities*. Qiu’s fugitives accumulate great fortunes from their illegal activities in China, but they are hunted by the police in both China and North America. Increasing cooperation between the Chinese, American, and Canadian government in recent years has made it more difficult for them to live in peace.

In my second chapter I have also discussed the role of home and family among immigrants and their children in various historical Chinatowns. In my analysis of the Chinese American Fae Myenne Ng’s accomplished novel *Bone* and the Chinese Canadian Wayson Choy’s novel *The Jade Peony*, Chinatown is hardly a cozy refuge for all Chinese immigrants. In *Bone*, Ng focuses on the lives of exploited sweatshop workers in San Francisco’s Chinatown, which proves to be a place of ethnic confinement for the younger generation, but also an existential haven and a site of memory offering emotional comfort to the immigrant generation. Here, members of both the first and second generation feel that they belong to a community; and they grow and develop along with the locale. In contrast to Ng’s San Francisco Chinatown, Wayson Choy, in *The Jade Peony*, presents a more intercultural Vancouver Chinatown. Because of the rich multiethnic context in Canada, the Chinese immigrants in Vancouver’s Chinatown are less segregated. Gradually they break down the boundaries that isolate them from the rest of Canadian society. In Marcus Lee Hansen’s words in his article “The Problem of the Third Generation Immigrant,” Choy’s novel narrates a story of “how troubled men, by courage and action, overcame their difficulties, and how people of different tongues and varied culture have managed to live together in peace” (215).

After these Chinatown novels, I have analyzed the photographs of George Grantham Bain’s New York Chinatown and Benjamin Chinn’s San Francisco Chinatown. Their representations of the

locales and the residents differ greatly in focus. Bain's photographs of New York Chinatown emphasize the foreign and mysterious appearance of the site and its residents in their attempts to meet the demands and expectations of the American public. In contrast, Benjamin Chinn, from an insider's point of view, tried to present San Francisco's Chinatown as it really was. The Chinese immigrants in Chinn's photographs are captured as they go about their daily business and seem to feel very much at home. Chinn's photographs suggest that Chinatown and Chinese immigrants are a part of America.

After analyzing Chinatown through the medium of photography, I turned to an analysis of family relationships among Chinese immigrants as represented in Frank Chin's play *The Year of the Dragon*. This play brilliantly dramatizes the generational conflicts in a Chinese migrant family — the stand-off between Chinese patriarchal tradition and the ideas deriving from modern American democracy, between the responsibility of inheritance and each individual's desire to find personal fulfillment, and the tension between interracial marriage and the preservation of ethnic purity. As Vladimir C. Nahirny observes, "Whereas the immigrant fathers accepted ethnicity as a way of life and, to that extent, as a living tradition, the sons viewed it increasingly as the 'dead hand of the past' which they were taught to hold dear to and respect in their childhood years" (272). The older generation clings to the Chinese patriarchal tradition, the Chinese cultural inheritance and ethnic purity, while the younger generation strives to assimilate into American society and culture. These conflicts inevitably lead to dramatic, and sometimes bitter, results in Frank Chin's Chinese immigrant family.

In my discussion of Fae Myenne Ng's *Steer toward Rock*, I presented the hidden history of Chinese paper immigrants who entered the country by forging immigration documents. Since they had no recognized legal identity, paper immigrants were often exploited and were unable to form normal families. Their only hope lay in their American-born offspring. As a daughter of a paper immigrant, Ng's fictional memoir seeks to retell and commemorate the traumatic past of one

member of this unfairly treated group. According to the critic William Boelhower's "processing system of Memory and Project" in his book *Through a Glass Darkly: Ethnic Semiosis in American Literature*, Ng's narrator puts herself "in contact with the foundational world of h[er] ancestors, reproduces h[er]self as member of an ethnic community, and is able to produce ethnic discourse" (87). Such is the responsibility of the second generation, which is assigned the task of healing their ancestors' broken families and reviving the lost discourse of the immigrant generation.

Chapter two concludes with an analysis of Ying Chen's *Les Lettres chinoises* and *Quatre Mille Marches: un rêve chinois*. In these two books, Ying Chen highlights the intractable homeless state of immigrants. Being physically and spiritually rootless, they try to remain connected to their past even as they hope to find respite in their new homeland. On the other hand, the condition of homelessness often suspends immigrants from belonging anywhere and this potentially enables them to have a broader picture of the world. In "The Stranger (1980) and The Web of Group Affiliation (1908)," German sociologist Georg Simmel describes a homeless immigrant: he "is freer, practically and theoretically; he surveys conditions with less prejudice; his criteria for them are more general and more objective ideals; he is not tied down in his action by habit, piety, and precedent" (39). These qualities can offer more opportunities and a broader horizon.

In Chapter three, I examined the linguistic barriers of the first-generation Chinese immigrants, the linguistic confusion of the second-generation, and the linguistic challenges of Chinese migrant writers. Combing through the historical records, I discovered that since the 1850s, early Chinese immigrants formed their own communities in Chinatown based on their home dialects. This Chinese language environment allowed many of them to work and live without having to leave Chinatown. Arnold Genthe's photographs of shop and street signs recorded the rich variety of services and facilities in San Francisco's Chinatown from the 1890s to the 1900s. However, one hundred years later, in Ha Jin's *A Good Fall*, the Chinese immigrants living in the Chinatown of Flushing, New York face predictable linguistic barriers as they seek to live a more comfortable life



beyond their original language community. Although they can still find jobs within Flushing's Chinatown, their inability to speak English prevents them from escaping economic exploitation, harsh living conditions, and low wages. This linguistic challenge troubles almost all first-generation Chinese immigrants at every social level, because they know that better English proficiency means a better life and a brighter future.

The challenges of the second-generations, those who were born in a Chinese-speaking family but educated in an English-speaking school, are quite different. They sound too American at home but too foreign at school. As Marcus Lee Hansen points out, "How to inhabit two worlds at the same time was the problem of the second generation" (204). Many second-generation children are also sent by their parents to Chinese schools with the hope that they will then preserve their mother tongue and Chinese heritage. In his photographs of San Francisco's Chinatown, Benjamin Chinn has captured the activities of the students and teachers at a Chinese school. The Chinese American children in the photographs seem to show strong interest in learning the Chinese language and culture. Yet the teacher in one of the photographs apparently understands that once out of school, these children will likely forget what they have learned of their parents' language and culture.

Frank Chin's two plays, *The Chickencoop Chinaman* and *The Year of the Dragon*, present the struggle which members of the second-generation have in forging a language of their own. The main characters of the two plays (Tam and Fred, respectively) both speak a hybrid language made up of white Christian English, African American slang, and Chinese words and accents. In their quest to become true Americans, both try to re-connect with their Chinese-speaking parents and ancestors while also imitating American speech patterns. However, the reactions of both their parents and American society force them to search for their own idiolect — in Frank Chin's words, "Buck Buck Bagaw". Chin believes that only idiolect can truly express the unique struggles of these second-generation Chinese Americans, who find it almost impossible to find their own identity in America.

Chapter three ends with a discussion of the difficulties Chinese migrant writers face in having to write in an adopted language. In Ha Jin's *A Free Life* and *The Writer as Migrant*, the author focuses on migrant writers who chose to give up writing in their mother tongue, not only because they want to succeed as writers but also because they feel estranged from their native country and language. Unsurprisingly, they find themselves having to face major difficulties when trying to write in another language: for instance, the lack of confidence, low language proficiency, and hierarchical market standards. Nonetheless, they try to overcome these difficulties by creating a style of their own and adopting themes that transcend the obstacles of language. As Werner Sollors remarks in *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture*, their migrant identity bestows upon them a "double consciousness" which "alerts them to possibilities of playfulness in establishing their voice" (252). This specially forged voice helps migrant writers bridge the gap between two or more languages, cultures, and sets of readers.

In Chapter four, I analyzed Chinese immigrants' effort to destroy stereotypes and redefine themselves on their own terms. By comparing George Grantham Bain's and Mary Tape's photographic representations of Chinese immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century, I observed that the American public media at that time considered Chinese immigrants as alien and inferior to white American culture. Racist stereotyping led to a number of discriminatory laws and the ghettoization of Chinese immigrants. As early as 1929, the African American writer Jean Toomer admitted in his article "Race Problems and Modern Society" that "it is never knowledge but the lack of it that provides the most fruitful condition for racial animosities, our lack of understanding supplies the very best circumstance for racial maladjustments to multiply and continue from generation to generation" (176). Thus, the challenge of breaking down racial barriers and the demand for recognition and respect became a major task for Chinese immigrants and their descendants. A pioneering civil rights activists, Mary Tape used the photographs she took of her family to prove that Chinese immigrants lived just like other white Americans and should enjoy the

same rights, including access to integrated public education. However, having grown up in a white Christian environment, she still believed in the superiority of white American culture and lifestyle and removed her family from the Chinese American community.

Maxine Hong Kingston is another Chinese American writer who has contributed to the fight against discrimination and stereotypes. In *The Woman Warrior*, she explored the identity of Chinese Americans from a feminist perspective. In order to give themselves a voice, Chinese American women have had to overcome oppression from both the Chinese patriarchy values and American racial discrimination and marginalization. However, Kingston has also been criticized for stereotyping Chinese Americans and Chinese people in an over-generalized and fantasized way. As Werner Sollors points out, “Ethnic writers in general confront an actual or imagined double audience, composed of ‘insiders’ and of readers, listeners, or spectators who are not familiar with the writer’s ethnic group” (249). Although Chinese and Chinese American readers have been able to forgive Kingston’s fictional and sometimes exaggerated depiction of Chinese people, due largely to her lack of direct knowledge of China, her book may still mislead American readers who are ignorant of Chinese and Chinese American culture.

In addition to the literary representation of Chinese immigrants’ fight for representation and equality, I have also discussed Corky Lee’s photographs, which document key historical moments in the fight for Chinese American civil rights. Whether the issue was the erasure of Chinese American presence in American history, the police brutality against Chinese Americans, or the discrimination and exploitation of Chinese American workers, Lee has used the medium of photographs to speak for this under-represented ethnic group. As Jean Toomer writes, “Race problems can be solved. In so far as they are sociological in character... they can be constructively dealt with by using the proper social and psychological means. These means are available” (187). Lee’s photographs have helped to raise funds for restoring Chinatown after 9/11; he also used photography creatively, to commemorate Chinese migrant workers’ unacknowledged contributions

to the building of the transcontinental railroad. These photographs have helped to increase Chinese Americans' visibility and voice in America.

After discussing Chinese migrant writers and photographers' fights against stereotypes and for equal rights, I explored issues dealing with the problem of defining Chinese American identity in David Henry Hwang's *Trying to Find Chinatown*. In this play, Hwang exposes a number of stereotypes of Chinatown and Chinese Americans, but he also considers different ways of defining Chinese American identity. For instance, is it defined by cultural roots or who one's grandparents are? Is ethnic identity based on group or individual identity? Is there such a thing as an authentic ethnic identity or is it merely a matter of symbolic attribution? Although Hwang merely dramatizes these questions in his play, it is clear that he favors a multidimensional, individualistic, and progressive Chinese American identity. Furthermore, Hwang prefers to de-emphasize ethnicity in as a literary and cultural theme because, as a creative artist, he finds it reductive and confining. As George Devereux argues, "[A]n insistent and even obsessive stressing of and clinging to one's ethnic identity reveals a flaw in one's self-conception as a unique multidimensional entity" (412). By casting off the straitjacket of ethnic identity, Chinese Americans and other ethnics can enjoy more freedom as they seek to enrich, develop, and express themselves.

In the last part of Chapter four, I have discussed Li-Young Lee's narration of migrant identity in his memoir *The Winged Seed: A Remembrance*. Lee compares the identity of immigrants to a winged seed— a symbol of inheritance, rebirth, mobility, and transformation. By recounting the diasporic experience of his family, Lee shows us how immigrants often construct continuously changing hybrid identities under the influence of shifting social contexts, human relationships, ancestries, and language. Thanks to the transportation revolution and new technologies, everyone seems to have become immigrants in a sense. In Randolph S. Bourne's words, "We are all foreign-born or the descendants of foreign-born" (94). In effect, Lee's family memoir inspires us to rethink how we have become who we are today.

In the end, I hope this dissertation will lead to further appreciation of the history and culture of Chinese immigrants in North America. Once an oppressed and marginalized minority, in recent decades Chinese Americans have now found a voice of their own and the respect and recognition they deserve. I hope my interdisciplinary study of a wide range of their creative artists — photographers, novelists, critics, and dramatists — has thrown some light on the challenges Chinese Americans and Chinese Canadians have had to overcome in order to find their place in multicultural North America.

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