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Contested “Chineseness” in Transnational Narratives: Works by Post-1979 Chinese/American Immigrant Writers Ha Jin and Geling Yan

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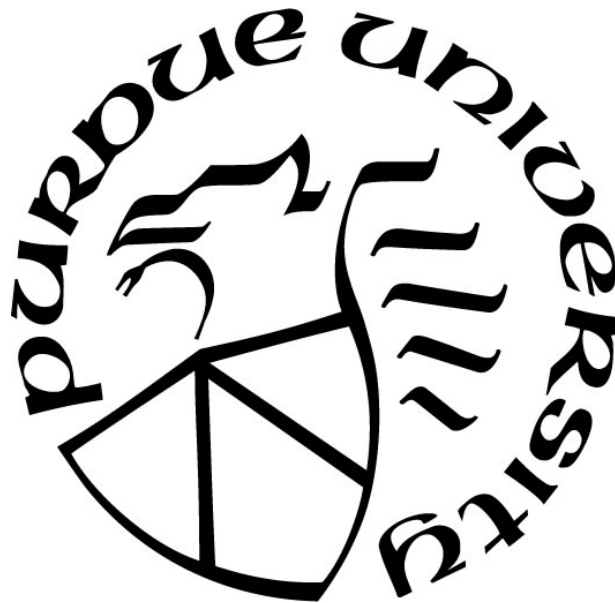
**CONTESTED “CHINESENESS” IN TRANSNATIONAL NARRATIVES:
WORKS BY POST-1979 CHINESE/AMERICAN IMMIGRANT WRITERS HA JIN AND
GELING YAN**

by
Ping Qiu

A Dissertation

*Submitted to the Faculty of Purdue University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of*

Doctor of Philosophy



School of Interdisciplinary Studies-American Studies

West Lafayette, Indiana

August 2018

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Dedication
To Mom and Dad
Zhao Guozhen 赵国珍 and Qiu Guozhi 仇国芝
Who live a difficult life with strength, love and humor
With love and affection

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ABSTRACT

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Title: Contested “Chineseness” in Transnational Narratives: Works by Post-1979
Chinese/American Immigrant Writers Ha Jin and Geling Yan.

Major Professor: Bill Mullen

This dissertation aims to claim immigrant literature as an essential part of Chinese American studies. It responds to the challenge by considering how “Chineseness” is negotiated, challenged, and transformed in the literary texts produced by both writers. I argue that “Chineseness” as presented by post-1979 immigrant writers Ha Jin and Geling Yan is a transnational process of defamiliarization, radicalization, and transformation. In their work, new immigrant writers are self-consciously and strategically positioning themselves as both insider and outsider. They engage in, negotiate, and challenge the troubling term “Chineseness” as defined in either U.S-centric/Eurocentric or Sinocentric points of view. For writers, the concern and movement of contending “Chineseness” from the China “center” to the “peripheral” are transnational in nature. Their definition of “Chineseness” is historically situated and not static; it is something that keeps evolving. It exceeds containment within fixed boundaries of identity and nation, transcending meanings inscribed by national ideologies. A key thread that weaves through this dissertation is how notions and claims of “Chineseness” operate discursively with Chinese and American national history, intersecting with race, class, gender, and ethnicity.

The work of both writers can be roughly divided into two categories, aligning with their creative careers: “China narratives” that focus on writing on China and “Chinese immigrant narratives” that focus on immigration and Chinese in America. In “China narratives,” both writers take a critical distance and create works that reflecting, criticizing, and renegotiating

Chineseness from afar. “China narratives” from a transnational vantage point involves constant efforts of “remembering” and “reimagining,” which entails telling tales of China, particularly of its recent historical past, Mao's Communist state from 1949 to 1976. Similarly, “Chinese immigrant narratives” capture the “transient” existential condition of immigration, meaning the conflicts of deconstructing and reconstructing Chineseness in the process of Chinese/American immigrant identity formation. In “Chinese immigrant narratives,” the writers’ creative energy is partially conditioned and facilitated by immigration, and it is subsequently channeled into their creative work on Chinese immigrant subjects in America. They join in unison with the ongoing discourse on Chineseness, as a racialized and gendered identity in Chinese immigrant history to the United States and the processes of historical and systematic racialization.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

In Chinese American studies, scholars struggle to define whether and how they should place “Chineseness” in Chinese American identity formation, particularly in the process of assimilation of first and second generation individuals. It is well known that America in the 1970s and 1980s first witnessed a strong surge of Chinese American literature. Works including Frank Chin's *The Chickencoop Chinaman* (1971), Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior* (1976) and *Chinamen* (1989), David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* (1988), and Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club* (1989) started to populate bookshelves, draw the interest of mainstream readers, and garner literary and critical acclaim. However, without exception, American-born Chinese American writers wrote all of them. Their work typically portrayed the post-immigration lives of their characters. The immigrant parents of these characters often seem to embody conflicts of interests, appear antagonistic to the American way of life, or represent an obstacle to the main characters' coming of age acculturation to Americanness. More often than not, the works are set comfortably within U.S. national space. In the work of these writers, “Americanness” has been

focalized to illustrate the entrenched issues of domestic identity politics intersecting with race, class, gender, and sexuality.

One of the failures of recognition of this emerging post-1979 Chinese immigrant literature stems from the problematic dichotomy existing in Chinese American studies that privileges America, domestic, and local over China, international, and global. Under the influence of Asian American movement in the 1960s, Chinese American literature is regarded above all a U.S. national-identified production. In the Chinese American studies field, scholars have had a long debate over allegiance toward “Americanness” or “Chineseness” and whether there should be a hyphen in Chinese-American. Maxine Hong Kingston, as an example, leads the debate in “claiming America.” She insists that Chinese Americans were above all Americans, and the hyphen should be taken away, because “without the hyphen, ‘Chinese’ is an adjective and ‘American’ a noun; a Chinese American is a type of American” (*Cultural Mis-reading* 60).

Kingston's desire for de-hyphenation stresses the importance of American identity politics over Chinese ethnic origin. In Belinda Kong's words, Kingston's refusal of the hyphen was “explicitly grounded on a mono-national schema where ‘Asian’ functioned as an ethnic marker and

‘American’ designated national identity” (138). Therefore, under the “claiming America” banner in Chinese American studies, the historical, cultural, and linguistic connection to China is lost and potential discussion on “Chineseness” is dismissed simply as either nonexistent or ignored as an “adjective” for the service of “Americanness.”

The new immigrant writers' transnational position and sensitivity invite a change from a hyphenated Asian American identity that emphasizes “claiming America” to an Asian/ American identity with the slash denoting “transnational” as an integral part of Asian/American experiences today. I borrow the “slash” from David Palumbo's definition of Asian/American identity and expand its meaning to transnational narratives. He uses the slash to mark the “oscillating aspects of Asian American identity” (*Asian/American* 1). In other words, Asian/American subject formation does not have to be an “either/or” choice between the two seeming separate terms; instead, it is “both/and.” The slash is both “the distinction installed between ‘Asian’ and ‘American’ and a dynamic, unsettled, and inclusive movement” (1). For both immigrant writers under this study, their transnational creative energy and focus, as

exemplified by their China narrative and Chinese immigrant narrative, signifies the slash, a claim of both China's historical past and the current immigrant American life.

Stuart Hall's formulation of identities also informs my reading of post-1979 Chinese/American immigrant literature. Positing the concept of identity as "not...essentialist, but...strategic and positional" in "Who Needs Identity?" Stuart Hall argues that identities "are constantly in the process of change and transformation" (3,4). For Hall, identity is about deploying the "resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from', so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves" (4). New immigrant writers bear identities that are "*in transition*," to cite Hall, and they must also learn to "translate and negotiate" between at least two identities and languages ("Cultural Identity" 310; original emphasis). In the process of transnational movement, identity is always situated, under negotiation, and never complete.

This dissertation aims to claim immigrant literature as an important part of Chinese American studies. As Amy Ling argues in "Teaching Asian American Literature," denial is "an

unfortunate exclusion that cuts off important sources of history, culture, and memory." Chinese American literature should acknowledge and include, in her words, "[w]riters whose sensibilities were shaped in Asia, those who write of American experiences in Asian languages or of Asian experiences in English." This partially explains the reason why I choose Ha Jin, an Anglophone writer, and Geling Yan, a Sinophone writer for my study. The concerns of Chineseness in their work include the use of the Chinese language or English as working language; the significance of writing China and writing immigrant experiences in their work; the relationship of their work to mainland China, their country of origin, and America, their adopted country. In addition, the concerns also involve their work in translation, transnational publication, and various methods of reading and categorizing their work as Chinese literature, Chinese American literature, and Overseas Chinese literature.

There are two distinct narratives engaging in exploring identity transformation and reconfiguration: one line of thought centers on the traditional nation-state that confines "Chineseness," controlled by the center China (in their case mainland China); the other one is to trace the decentered peripheral definition of "Chineseness" redrawn by the larger Chinese

diaspora community in the United States. The work of both writers can be roughly divided into two categories, aligning with their creative careers: “China narratives” that focus on writing on China and “Chinese immigrant narratives” that focus on immigration and Chinese in America.

Ien Ang writes that “Chineseness” is “a homogenizing label whose meanings are not fixed and pre-given, but constantly renegotiated and rearticulated, both inside and outside China” (5). My study elaborates on the transnational narratives of both writers, which go beyond a solely nation-based narrative and require attentiveness to both a “China narrative” and “Chinese immigrant narrative.” By being able to write on Chinese and immigrant subjects in a different national space, their work has enriched understanding of Chineseness in the contemporary transnational movement.

In “China narratives,” both writers take a critical distance and create works that reflecting, criticizing, and renegotiating Chineseness from afar. “China narratives” from a transnational vantage point involves constant efforts of “remembering” and “reimagining,” which entails telling tales of China, particularly of its recent historical past, Mao's Communist state from 1949 to 1976. By writing on Mao’s China from a critical distance, which affords the distance of time

and space, they decenter Chineseness and critically engage in the re-evaluation of Mao's China.

The post-1979 generation of immigrant writers was born after the establishment of Communist China under Mao's leadership in 1949, and thus they were raised and came of age in Mao's China.

The legacy of Mao's China left palpable influences and marks on their lives. Remembering becomes a diasporic writer's weapon in fighting against state-sanctioned amnesia, against forgetting their lives and the lives of many others who lived through these years. Re-imagining is their way of rewriting Mao's history, as a writer's resistance to the hegemonic official grand historical narrative. In the diaspora, there are abundant well-kept and documented witness accounts, journalistic works, and memoirists' writing of Mao's China. However, they fictionalize the past to make it more vivid and alive. The horrific history crystalizes creative tales with literary values only after a certain time lapse, which enables literary works to be born to engage the period.

Similarly, "Chinese immigrant narratives" capture the "transient" existential condition of immigration, meaning the conflicts of deconstructing and reconstructing Chineseness in the process of Chinese/American immigrant identity formation. In "Chinese immigrant narratives,"

the writers' creative energy is partially conditioned and facilitated by immigration, and it is subsequently channeled into their creative work on Chinese immigrant subjects in America.

Their work becomes engaged in depicting the experiences of Chinese in America. They join in unison with the ongoing discourse on Chineseness, as a racialized and gendered identity in Chinese immigrant history to the United States and the processes of historical and systematic racialization.

This dissertation responds to the challenge by considering how "Chineseness" is negotiated, challenged, and transformed in the literary texts produced by both writers. I argue that "Chineseness" as presented by post-1979 immigrant writers is a transnational process of defamiliarization, radicalization, and transformation. In their work, new immigrant writers are self-consciously and strategically positioning themselves as both insider and outsider. They engage in, negotiate, and challenge the troubling term "Chineseness" as defined in either U.S.-centric/Eurocentric or Sino-centric points of view. For writers, the concern and movement of contending "Chineseness" from the China "center" to the "peripheral" are transnational in nature. Their definition of "Chineseness" is historically situated and not static; it is something that keeps

evolving. It exceeds containment within fixed boundaries of identity and nation, transcending meanings inscribed by national ideologies. A key thread that weaves through this dissertation is how notions and claims of “Chineseness” operate discursively with Chinese and American national history, intersecting with race, class, gender, and ethnicity.

The project seeks to contribute to the shifting understandings of China and Chineseness within the context of the increasing presence of transnationalism between the United States and China and, in particular, the continuous metamorphosis of Chinese/American identity in its intricate web of historical and cultural connection to China. Additionally, the project will testify to Homi Bhabha's “third space” by demonstrating that these immigrant writers open up new ways of thinking about when identity is in flux, and considering where that leaves the nation, language, and history.¹ In focusing on post-1979 Chinese/American immigrant literature, it considers the nexus of diaspora, post-colonial studies, and transnational studies. Both writers,

¹ “Third space” refers to the intersections between colliding cultures, a liminal space “which gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (211). These negotiations are referred to as “the process of cultural hybridity” (211). In this “in-between” space, new cultural identities are formed, reformed, and constantly in a state of being. For more on this, please see Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture*.

among many others, in their concerted efforts to engage in the "Chineseness" discourse, represent a larger intellectual community that gives critical voice to challenging the fixed, static, and essentialist definition of "Chineseness" in both Chinese studies and Chinese American studies.

1.1. Post-1979 Chinese Immigrant Writers Ha Jin and Geling Yan

Post-1979 Chinese/American immigrant writing emerged in the 1990s and continued to flourish today. 1979 signals the formalization of U.S.-China diplomatic relations and the ensuing transnational cultural, economic and political exchange and flow of students and scholars, including writers under investigation of the current project who were part of the first post-1979 immigration wave from mainland China. 1979 also marks the official ending of America's Iron Curtain policy toward China and initiated a change away from the Cold War mentality in China-U.S. relations. This mentality was further dismantled in 1991 after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and disintegration of the former Soviet bloc.

In China, 1979 marks the consolidation of Deng Xiaoping's power and the stability and consistency of China's economic policy of Opening Up and Reform, which lays the foundation

for successive decades of miraculous economic growth in China along with drastic cultural and social shifts and changes. As the new wave of Chinese immigration from mainland China starts since 1979, it also reflects a growing transnational phenomenon across China and the United States. The new post-1979 immigration wave from mainland China is also made possible by America's 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which abolished the quota system that favored northern European immigrants. There's growing transnational movements of people, commerce, and ideas between the two countries in the post-1979 era as China opened to the world and quickly integrated itself into the global system. As I argued earlier, the ongoing connection and tension between global/local poses severe challenges to the existing nation-state paradigm in both Chinese American studies and Chinese Studies,

This particular historical juncture of post-1979 immigrant literature, in the example of Ha Jin and Geling Yan, gives impetus to the two most prominent tropes in their writing, "China narratives" and "Chinese immigrant narratives." The post-1979 immigrant generation had lived in Mao's China and been infused with Maoist Chineseness, which at its heart invites a critical reflection. The immigrant generation and their recognition of the self are tied to Communist

ideology; this ideology has indoctrinated the self and tied it to the state and the party, and therefore the nation. All these superstructures interpolate their understanding of Chineseness in Mao's period. In the 1980s, when China opened its door after 30 years of cutting off contact with the world, it found itself in conflict with the influx of new ideas. When the door to the outside world opened, literary-minded people who sought education and opportunity abroad became re-educated about the world; this forced them to renegotiate the relationship between self and other, self and the world. The issues both immigrant writers explore in their work related to their personal experience in China prior to their immigration and their lived experience in America, first as students, then as immigrants. During the process of immigration, living life across national, linguistic, and cultural borders reflected their transformation of understanding, deconstructing, and reconstructing "Chineseness," away from the China center and in the American context.

Post-1979 immigrant writers Geling Yan and Ha Jin, among others, spent their formative years in China and in the 1980s moved to the United States, where they ultimately made their homes. They were both affected directly by Mao's politics and troubled by the legacy of Mao's

politics. The post-1979 period also includes the pivotal event of the Tiananmen protests in 1989, which ended the student pro-democracy movement as well as the high tide of idealism in the 1980s. It further crushed the dreams of democracy or any political change in China's near future. The massacre compelled countless international students who were already enrolled in graduate programs overseas to stay abroad. Many of them would go on to pursue creative writing and become celebrated authors in the diaspora.² For instance, in America, Ha Jin took a clearer and stronger political stance against authoritarian China, and Tiananmen further propelled his incisive re-examination of Mao's politics and legacy in his work during the 1990s, particularly in *Waiting* (1999), which I discuss in Chapter 2.1. The event also induced further exodus of intellectuals, dissidents, and political exiles from China. Geling Yan is among them who chose to leave China after the Tiananmen protests.

² Prominent poets Bei Dao and Yang Lian, exiled to a foreign land, both have links to the 1978-1979 Democracy Wall movement and the underground magazine *Today* (Jintian). Fictions writers such as Ah Cheng, Qiu Xiaolong, Shouhua Qi, and Ha Jin settled in the United States. In England, aside from Ma Jian and Hong Ying, who both write in Chinese, there are the English-language best-selling Jung Chang, Xinran, and most recently, Guo Xiaolu. In France, Gao Xingjian, Dai Sijie, and Shan Sa have done the same for Francophone literature. In Holland, Lulu Wang's debut Dutch-language novel was a best-seller.

Both writers insist on remembering Mao's China, which both have experienced and knew well. Though they are geographically located abroad, nonetheless they continue to imagine and write about China. "China narrative" becomes their way of dealing with China's turbulent and violent revolutionary past and their repressed memories. Many Chinese in diaspora consider 1989 as a watershed moment in their disillusionment with the government and their final separation from the state dictatorship and by and large the country itself. In Belinda Kong's research into Post-1989 Tiananmen fictions, she writes, "after the massacre, we can detect in diasporic literature an intensified engagement with matters of political power, a new kind of negative identificatory tug of war with the communist state"(6). Yan and Jin's work shows a distinctive disdain of Mao's Communist politics. Their writing reflects their fundamental distrust of the party-state and their continuing strong critique of Mao's China. Their critique of Mao's China constitutes deconstruction of "Chineseness" as dictated by the state, the party, and by radical Maoist ideology. Moreover, they explicate the changing meaning of 'Chineseness' and the troubled legacy of Mao and Maoism. In America, they continue to negotiate and carve a creative space re-imagining the Maoist era. Their work highlights that while Maoism has exerted

tremendous pain and suffering onto Chinese people, there are alternative discourses beyond the official historical discourse, and beneath the sheer number of deaths recorded in Mao's time, the individual life has been lived, and humanity and humanism have not been destroyed.

At some point in their transnational relocation of themselves, and in their shift of writing subjects, Yan and Jin start to examine their immigrant selves in America, their adopted country. I categorize these works as their “immigrant narratives.” When they engage in cultural identity discourse on America, their understanding of “Chineseness” expands. They found America and its well-functioning capitalist society, which advocates for individualism and materialism, so incongruent with Maoist China; this ran contrary to the social and cultural values and codes that shaped their coming of age in Maoist China, where collectivism and sacrifice of self for the better good (state, party, nation) were called upon. This created a confrontation of American capitalistic value on the one hand; on the other hand, the entrenched issue of “Chineseness” as an ethnic and racial marker has deeply tied to the racial discourse in America, exemplified in Chinese immigration history to America.

Additionally, in America in the 1990s, Chineseness has been dominated by the success stories of Asian Americans in careers, in higher education, and in the successful path set up by the wiz kids success stories of second-generation Chinese Americans and earlier Taiwan immigrants in the post-1965 immigration wave. The post-1979 wave of immigration from the mainland to the United States has been subject to the myth of the "model minority" as well as the racial discourse that continues to exclude Chinese, as perpetual foreigners within America. The exemplary works I explore in this project illustrate the intricate and complicated web of race, gender, class, and ethnicity in the discourse of Chineseness in America.

Of the two writers, the American public is perhaps more familiar with Ha Jin. Born Jin Xuefei in Liaoning, China, in 1956, Ha Jin (pen name) joined the People's Liberation Army at age fourteen. He served in the Red Army for five years and based many of his short stories and novels on those experiences. He began studying comparative poetics at Brandeis University in 1985 and had initially intended to return to China after graduation to teach at the university level, but after watching television images of the Beijing bloodshed in 1989, he decided to remain in the United States. He is now a professor of English at Boston University. Jin became a prolific

writer, with nine novels, seven short story collections, and three poetry collections. He is a highly visible and recognizable figure on the American literary scene. He has garnered various literary awards including the Pen/Faulkner Award (twice, in 1996 and 2000), the Flannery O'Connor Award (1996), the National Book Award (1999), and the Pen/Hemingway Award (2000). In 2008, he published a collection of prose essays titled *The Writer as Migrant*. The American Academy of Arts and Sciences elected Ha Jin, a fellow in 2005.

Examples of what I categorize as “China narratives” include his short story collections, such as *Ocean of Worlds* (1996), *Under the Red Flag* (1997), and *The Bridegroom* (2000); *In the Pond* (1998). His short stories are exceptionally well written and are based roughly on either his military service or the observations that his military service afforded him. In addition to short stories, he also produced novels on China subjects such as *Waiting* (1999) and *The Crazy* (2002). *Waiting* won him the National Book Award in 1999 and the PEN/Faulkner Award in 2000. This established his career as an Anglophone writer in the United States. This dissertation devotes a chapter to a discussion of this particular work.

Only after Jin established himself as a recognized Anglophone Chinese immigrant writer in America does he start to write about lives of contemporary immigrants in the United States.

Two decades of living in the United States also made him aware of how out of touch he was with current developments in China and the continued metamorphosis of “Chineseness”—that is, how Chinese people continue to re-invent and redefine themselves in the post-Mao era. He became more secure about writing about immigrant subjects in the United States; two decades of living as one provided him with raw material that he could delve into and he felt qualified to write from this perspective. *The Crazy* (2002) ends with the protagonist escaping China after the Tiananmen protests. His next novel *War Trash* (2004) is set in South Korea, where Chinese POW (prisoners of war) were held during the Korean War. As a transition, after these novels, Jin starts to write on immigrant subjects in America. His semi-autobiographic novel, *A Free Life* (2007), is the book I discuss in the chapter on his “immigrant narratives.” In his later career, he has continued writing mainly about Chinese in America; for example, his short story collection *A Good Fall* (2009) focuses on the immigrant experience and his novel *The Map of Betrayal* (2014)

tells the story of a Chinese charged with espionage in America, who lived a double life as a double agent for China and America.

Another writer, Geling Yan, also affected by Mao's politics and the Tiananmen protests, came to the United States at the end of 1989 and lived in the San Francisco Bay area. She often travels transnationally since she is married to an American diplomat. As a Sinophone writer, she is lesser known to the American reading public, but she is among the most celebrated and critically acclaimed novelists and screenwriters in China and the Chinese diaspora. She was born in Shanghai in 1958. Like Ha Jin, she served in the People's Liberation Army (PLA); she became a ballerina in the PLA at the age of 12 and later served as a journalist during the Sino-Vietnam war (1979). Yan began her writing at the end of the 1970s before she retired from military service. In 1986 she was admitted to the Chinese Writers' Association (a national organization) as its youngest member, at the age of 28. During and after her studies at Columbia College in Chicago, from which she earned an MFA in creative writing in 1989, she continued to publish award-winning short stories and novellas, as well as novels in Chinese-language literary journals, first in Taiwan, then in mainland China, and finally in translation in the United States. Since

1986, she published over twenty books and won numerous literary awards.³ Her most acclaimed works are *Xiaoyi duoque* 小姨多鹤 (2008), *Di jiuge gufu* 第九个寡妇(2006), *Huizi wuyu* 穗子物语(2005), *Tianyu* 天浴 (1995), *Jijuzhe* 寄居者 (2009), and *Jinling shisancai* 金陵十三钗 (2005).

Yan divides her writing career into three periods: her work written in the first period, before 1989, are often are themed on her army experience in China; the second period spans from 1989 to roughly 2000, during which time she immersed herself in writing the experiences of immigrants; and in the third period, from 2000 until the present, she writes historical novels about China's past. Her work available in English includes translations of her three novels *The Flowers of War* (2012)⁴ *The Lost Daughter of Happiness* (2002), and most recently, *Little Aunt*

³ Tianyu won the “Best Fiction” award from Taiwan Lianhe Newspaper 台湾联合报文学奖, and its film adaptation won the American Film Critics Association Award in 1999, and the Taiwan Golden Horse Award for the Best Screenplay in 1998. Her more recent fictions *Di Jiuge Guafu* won “Excellent Novel” by Zhonghua Dushubao 中华读书报; *Xiaoyiduohe* won “The Best Fiction of Five Years” by “Contemporary” 当代 literary magazine, and “The Best Oversea Chinese Fiction” by “Zhongshanbei” “中山杯.” *The Lost Daughter of Happiness* (2002) is on the best-seller list of *Los Angeles Times*.

⁴ *The Flowers of War* was published as a novella in Chinese in 2005. It was made into a movie by Chinese director Zhang Yimou and screened in North America in December 2011.

Crane (2015) and a short story collection, *White Snake and Other Stories* (1999). So far, *Banquet Bug* (2007) is her only novel written in English. In this dissertation, I focus on her work from the second period, the 1990s and early 2000s, including her immigrant stories and her early historical writing of Mao's China. Unfortunately, in this period, only two of her early works have been translated: *The Lost Daughter of Happiness* (2001), the Chinese version *Fusang* (扶桑), was first published in Taiwan in 1996, and *White Snake (Baishe 白蛇)* (1999). These two will be under study in this dissertation project.

Yan acknowledges many of her 1990s writings inspired by the "marginal existence." Calling herself "a member of the Chinese diaspora," Yan identifies with those writers who "depart from the mainstream of their native language but are also on the periphery of another culture" (*Boximiya lou* 149). After leaving China in 1989, Yan spent her first decade in America, honing skills of creative writing in MFA program at Columbia College in Chicago (1989-1992) and writing incessantly. Her first decade of American life materialized into many great works. In addition to her "China narratives," such as *Reverse River (Daotanghe 倒淌河)*, *Earthly World (Ren Huan 人寰)*, *White Snake (Baishe 白蛇)*, she produced a collection of "immigrant

narratives." These include short story collections such as *Shaonu Xiaoyu* 少女小鱼, Overseas (*Hainabian* 海那边) and novels *Fusang* 扶桑 and *No Way Out Café* (*Wu chulu kafeiguan* 无出路咖啡馆).

Talking about her interests in writing about Mao's China, which is a subject exhausted by many writers and which happened decades ago, she claims that mainly because of the temporal and physical "distance" she has in writing about Mao's China, the Cultural Revolution, in particular, becomes fresh under her pen. When asked why violence often shadows her novels, she emphasizes, "My writing derives from my traumatic memory" (qtd in Rong Gao 33). Yan also publicly asserts that she is not interested in politics, but humanity in general. Geling Yan "prefers fiction for its ability to arrive at the truth, looming up from the gapped memory of history and questioning of identity, in a confrontation with the troubled past and the experience of trauma" (qtd in Shenshen Cai 327).

Chineseness in Maoist China meant survival of humanity, but it also meant sublimity in what she calls "extreme circumstances." The pursuing of humanity and universal values enables her narratives to transcend the limitations of language, time, and political ideology. The elevation

of universal and shared humanity is how Geling Yan approaches her writing. Marginalized by China's Maoist politics and immigration to the U.S, she takes full advantage of her decentered position in the "marginal" and as an "outsider." Her experiences of the period and Maoism and her experience as a marginal person in American society deepens her understanding of humanity, as both experiences place a human being in an extremely trying and vulnerable position. Her works are best at her representation of human's vulnerability, revealing the pain, the helpless, the cruel, and the voiceless through a gendered lens. Through these depictions of human existences on the marginal, she emphasizes the theme of "dignity" of human life.

I choose Jin and Yan, among others, first because of their shared similarities in age and experience including their military service to PLA and immigration experience to the U.S. Their military service sheltered them from widespread political persecution and participation in it. Both writers were exempted from directly persecuting others or being persecuted during the Cultural Revolution. However, the military also is a heavily controlled ideological unit in Chinese society. In their traveling with the military trope, they are put in contact with a broader contact with people and get in close touch with lived social reality. Their experience of

immigration first as international students and then as professionals in the U.S. affords them greater freedom and critical acumen and power in creating their stories of Chinese subjects and immigrant subjects, which I categorize as “China narratives” and “Chinese immigrant narratives.”

Secondly, I chose them because Jin is a well-known Anglophone immigrant male writer and Yan is a well-received Sinophone woman writer. Often compared with many other writers in exile and diaspora, such as Joseph Conrad, Yutang Lin, Vladimir Nabokov, Jin wrote outside of his mother tongue and chose to write in the English language. For Ha Jin, the alienation from language is the self-exiled position he takes with his country. He re-conceptualizes his identity, value, by renegotiating his relationship with language and country. The Tiananmen protests, which, according to Ha Jin, influenced his decision to write in English, catalyzed an exploration of the alienation of writing outside of one’s mother language⁵. This attention to the mourning of the mother tongue places hopes in achieving a destiny in the English language.

⁵ On May 30, 2009, *New York Times* Op-Ed piece, Ha Jin wrote:

After the crackdown, some friends assured me that the Communist Party would admit its mistake within a year. I could not see why they were so optimistic. I also thought it would be foolish to wait passively for historical change. I had to find my own existence, separate from the state power in China. That was when I started to think about staying in America and writing exclusively in English, even if China

Before coming to the United States, in China, Yan was recognized as a promising rising writer and was admitted as the youngest member of the Chinese Writers' Association. It is natural for her to continue to use Chinese as her creative language, the mother tongue in which she already began developing her writing skills while still in China. In the U.S., her writing took off and continued flourishing, spurred by her series of stories of immigrant narratives. She worked on as she pursued her MFA in creative writing in the United States and which were published in the 1990s. Geling Yan's *Fusang*, published in 1999, signifies her maturity in her Chinese subject in American sites. Compared with the linguistic struggle that besets Ha Jin, who struggles to find a language and audience for his writing in American readership, Yan resorts to large cultural China, which comprises the mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the diasporic Chinese community, for readership. Her work and its refreshing images and new immigrant characters of the 1990s were well received in Taiwan. Taiwan has also proved to be fertile soil for her work because of earlier flourish of Taiwan Overseas literature (*Liuxuesheng wenxue*), which opened a path for her publications.

was my only subject, even if Chinese was my native tongue.

Thirdly, their work has consistently demonstrated similar thematic concern and the trajectory of writing career shifts and changes in writing about China subject and immigrant subject in America. They share similar interests in “small stories” beyond the national discourse and grand narrative of history. In general, both see historical fiction as a way to fictionalize the past to such an extent that history is reduced to a sheer setting. Their narratives never attempt to efface the narrating subject, rather, they place the narrator’s self in the spotlight, foregrounding personal experience, perception and, most importantly, renegotiating the individual’s place in history via reclaiming memory and reimagining history.

Their preoccupation with history is understandable since history shapes and infiltrates all aspects of their lives. Their revisionistic view on history is genuinely refreshing and liberating. To them, the official grand historical narrative is no longer reliable, or relatable. Instead, they regard history as a product manipulated by power and discourse. Individual lived history needs to be rediscovered from aphasia and amnesia. It is in the identity crisis and existential violence that emerges an awakening of the rekindled spirit of humanity.

In their works, the resurgence of the individual self, subjectivity, and universal values are prominent. In interviews, Jin often stresses that the story in his writing can happen to anyone as a human being because his writing is "about humanity and human possibility" rather than "about a particular society" or a particular ideology. (Jin, "Individualism" 20). This universal humanism is generally shared with Yan. The universal appeal expressed in their works differentiates them from some modern and contemporary Chinese writers who are trapped in either nativism or elitism. Elitism, as Chow maintains, looks up to and idealizes the West whereas nativism, according to Chen Ruoxi, is entangled in the so-called "Chinese emotional knot" or "homeward longing," which becomes the impetus of writing, be it writing for dissemination of Chinese culture, for cultural conservation, or recently for the new land of Chinese America (11). The universal appeal in their stories confirms Chow's view that the Cultural Revolution is a process in the history of modern civilization instead of China only (*Writing Diaspora* 22).

Two writers share commonalities but also differ significantly in the terrain of literary imagination. The Chinese male subjects in Ha Jin's work is over-determined either by a revolutionary consciousness, a nationalistic feeling, and duty, or a responsibility for explaining

and discrediting the past. On the contrary, Yan's women characters often refuse to be symbolically fixed by meanings of the past in the present. According to Chandra Talpade

Mohanty's observation, feminism and the technologies of memory are often linked:

Feminist analysis has always recognized the centrality of rewiring and remembering history, a process that is significant not merely as a corrective to the gaps, erasures, and misunderstandings of hegemonic masculinist history but because of the very practice of remembering and rewriting leads to the formation of political consciousness and self-identity. (78)

Yan's vision for women does indeed liberate them from many restrictive structures of sexuality, family, and gendered role.

In her work, Geling Yan has staged interventions into the previously male-dominated arenas of cultural and national histories, and familiar discourse. Her feminist position has called into question these categories through careful analysis of gendered ideological systems and institutions. Yan continues to center her works on women's experiences, exploring the entanglement between history and herstory, gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity. While she

eloquently explores the theme “gendered Chineseness” as a communist national construction in Maoist China in *White Snake*, in her immigrant narratives, she continues to explore themes of gendered but also racialized identity across national borders, entrenched in U.S history of its racist past and present towards Chinese. Like in *White Snake*, Yan examines woman's self-position in history, but unlike her "China narratives," these immigrant narratives focus on how generations of immigrant women navigate the complex cultural map of China and U.S. in the more contentious Chinese history in the U.S. She reaffirms the faith in humanity, particularly in the strength of women in harsh historical time in American history and the struggle as immigrants in America. Though the experience is dehumanizing as in the story of *Fusang*, the survival strategy, the will to live is strong, and it passes to the immigrant subjects to continue this legacy in the American soil. Yan confirms in *Fusang* of immigrant pioneering spirit and women's adaptability to the new life in the U.S.

The post-1919 immigrant literature has opened new avenues for discussions of cultural identities. It has assumed a seminal role in defining the parameters and meanings of Chineseness after 1979. As Belinda Kong reckons in *Tiananmen Fictions*, “[n]o longer is the definition of

Chineseness solely or even primarily the activity of those living within the People's Republic of China, nor are the geopolitical regions of Taiwan and Hong Kong the main alternative spots for self-representation. Instead, the cultural geography of Chineseness has been considerably redrawn" (7). This dissertation is not an attempt to define "Chineseness," but illustrates heightened self-awareness of the fluidity of the term when engaged in the practice of reading and critique of post-1979 immigrant writing. Furthermore, this dissertation does not intend to set Western perception of "Chineseness" in dichotomy with Chinese perception of "Chineseness." It is imperative not to essentialize Chineseness in a Sinocentric point of view or Orientalist conception. Instead, I plan to tease out how writers Ha Jin and Geling Yan in their representative works engaged in concerted collective efforts at "deconstructing" Chineseness at the historical juncture in the post-1979 era.

1.2.Changing Definition of Chineseness: A Historical Overview

The conceptualization and reconceptualization of Chineseness have become one of the major topics in the newly rising field of "Chinese cultural studies" since the 1990s. Coincidentally, American academia since the 1990s has also seen a large volume of scholarly publication on

"Chineseness" in the Chinese diaspora and Chinese American studies. Cultural critics Arif Dirlik and Zhang Xudong, in their introduction to a special issue of *Boundary 2* on postmodernism and China, explain: "The contradiction between identities that may be marked as Chinese and their dispersal into many localities around the world forces a rethinking of modernist notions of a unified and unquestioned Chinese identity, which is represented by the socialist state" (4). The quotation sums up first the Chinese diaspora movement and second the questionable legacy of the socialist state of China. The concept of Chinese identity, or Chineseness, has become the testing ground for global and local, and East and West encounters at various points in China's history.

In my research project, I find it most helpful to examine the critical Chinese discourse from both the center and the periphery. I borrow from Tu Weiming, a prominent Chinese diaspora scholar, who advocates a paradigm shift in Chinese studies and Chinese diaspora studies, from "center" to "peripheral" and from "nation-state" to "diaspora." In his influential 1994 article "Cultural China: The Periphery as the Center," Tu uses the "center to peripheral" shift to change the perception of Chineseness from archaic historical time to the modern era. By

“decentering” the meaning of Chineseness from the center China, Tu considers the expansion of Chinese to diaspora Chinese around the globe. In this way, it helps to shed light on our understanding of the Chinese transnational movement in the fracture of space and time, and the changing perception of Chineseness: their perception of what defines who they are, who defines them, and how they are defined. The axes cut through both narratives in the quest for “Chineseness” in the shifting and changing national space and historical period. The immigrant writers Yan and Jin, in their work, investigate how Chineseness has evolved and expanded across borders and how Chinese diaspora and immigrant communities identify their “Chineseness.” I examine the relationship between the socialist legacy of China's Maoist State (1949-1976) and Chineseness, and immigration and Chineseness in the Chinese/American identity formation.

1.2.1. Chineseness and Historical Changes in China

As China has been continuously under crisis—national crises by external forces and by internal implosions—Chineseness has been a most unstable identification that needs specific context and history. The general trends are 1) Chineseness is unstable and constantly on shifting ground, subject to dramatic, traumatic, and tremendous historical changes; 2) Chineseness is a

new thing that emerged from the early discourse at the turn of the twentieth century when China, as a new nation-state started to emerge, and it is profoundly affected by the race discourse and social Darwinism (pseudo-science); 3) it has inherent ties to nationalism, it is deeply embedded in the discourse of modernity at the turn of the twentieth century, and it represents a binary of tradition and modernity, the Western influence, and indigenous ingenuity. On the one hand, the modernists counterposed modernity to tradition and regarded traditional culture as the enemy of modernization. On the other hand, “establishing the new” becomes an urgent task to reconcile Chineseness and modernity. Therefore, the modern Chineseness is set against forces of traditional “essentialist cultural Chineseness” and Chineseness conditioned by modernity under Western influences.

One of the central intellectual problems in China’s modern and contemporary history is the reconciliation between “Chineseness” and modernity. In the modern time since the Opium War in 1839, China has seen itself calling for the re-examination of “Chineseness” at each critical historical juncture since the condition, and social context keeps changing. China has gone through various ideological persuasion, reforms, and revolutions, as well as swinging between

traditions distilled by centuries-long dynastic history and modernity brought about by the growing integration of China in the world history.

The early twentieth century is a period in which China is transformed into a modern nation-state. The onset of modernity in China challenged the traditional thoughts on “Chineseness.” “Chineseness” prior to modern times was often understood as both geopolitical and cultural. This Chineseness was defined by its three millennia of recorded history and civilization. Its continuing civilization and complex and sophisticated bureaucratic political system, its language and flourishing philosophic thought made China’s rulers believe that China is at the center of the world, literarily explaining what China, *Zhongguo* (中国) or the Middle Kingdom, means. In *The Chineseness of China: Selected Essays* (1991), Wang Gungwu, a Chinese Singaporean historian, lays out the stages of development of the concept of Chinese from history. He identifies a couple of signifiers; he called “major symbols of Chinese unity from Qin to mid nineteen century: the language, the personalized dynastic state and its cyclical fortunes, and the immense influence of Confucian rhetoric and institutions at all levels of society” (3).

Therefore, the pre-modern Chineseness is defined by its historical, cultural, and geopolitical significances. Over centuries, the rise and fall of each dynastic rule never stop carrying the banner of upholding “Chineseness” as a unifying cultural marker, disregarding the fact that dynasties such as the Yuan (1271-1368) and Qing (1644-1911) are ruled by ethnic minorities. The cultural Chineseness, bound by its history, language, and philosophy, is believed to be strong enough to diffuse, be emulated by, and assimilate any alien cultural elements. John K. Fairbank rightly terms this “superiority” of the Chinese way of being as “Chinese world order,” or “Sino-centrism” (2). He also points out the theory and practice of China’s foreign relations throughout its 2,000 years of history, is based on “an assumption of Chinese superiority” (2).

This Sinocentric worldview had not been challenged for centuries until Western imperial powers forced China’s door open by military force in two Opium Wars (1839-1842, 1856-1860) in the mid-nineteenth century and onward. These circumstances shocked the Chinese intelligentsia into what Lin Yu-sheng called the “crisis of Chinese consciousness” in his book. From the explosive reform movement of 1889 by the Qing's imperial court to the establishment

of the Republic of China in 1912, the intertwined foundations of Chinese society, politics, economics, and culture crumbled. Most important of all, the New Cultural Movement in the 1920s and 1930s, a broader literary and cultural movement inspired by the massive student protests in Beijing on May 4, 1919, led to a prolonged cultural and social force calling for change.

The New Cultural Movement was a cultural modernization movement aimed at breaking away from the old tradition, customs, thoughts, and culture and starting a new and free life of individual choice and agency. First, the whole dynastic feudal system was brought into question. The New Cultural Movement upheld Western liberal values such as “democracy” and “science” as powerful moral and political tools against centuries-long restrictions enforced by feudal Confucian ideology. The “democracy” part of the new culture was never fully put in place; the fall of the first Republic of China soon followed. “Science” had more currency in introducing social Darwinism; Marxism; and new thoughts on sexuality, race, and identity. Frank Dittotter, in his article on the origin of the concept of “race” in China, argues that the identity of Chinese as a race and ethnicity began to form at the turn of the twentieth century. The popularization and

circulation of the pseudo-science of social Darwinism and its corresponding idea of “the survival of the fittest” catalyzed national crisis. The racial discourse promoted nationalism and offered “a sense of belonging based on presumed links of blood at the time.” In Diotter’s words, “[i]t shaped the identity of millions of people in Republican China” (5).

Second, in the social and cultural realm, significant changes were taking place. Early modernists proposed breaking away from traditional cultural values and practices. Louise Edwards writes in *Gender, Politics, and Democracy: Women's Suffrage in China* that “China's intellectual class began to question naturalized assumptions about China's place in the world, and about ideologies behind core relationships in China itself-between the individual and the family... and importantly between men and women” (106). Represented in early twentieth-century novels are the themes of free love, breaking away from the family, and sexuality and identity. Chineseness encompasses race, nation, and ethnicity, but also cultural heritage. At the turn of the twentieth century, Lu Xun regarded Confucian culture as a “cannibalistic culture,” the

kind of culture that devours individuality, creativity, stepping on other people and feeding on other people.⁶

The 1920s and 1930s were one of the critical historical moments in twentieth-century China that not only challenged the aforementioned China Sino-centralism but also has heightened the identity crisis as a Chinese that was previously defined as given and fixed. The unchallenged assumption of the Sinocentric view of Chinese identity became severely fractured. This severe self-doubt, and the project of seeking individual identity in relation to national salvation, history, and cultural past, continued through the twentieth century. They propelled a desperate search for the regeneration and renovation of Chineseness that is tied to national salvation. Educated elites had to rethink the entire premise of the Chinese civilization and in a radically new global context. As the cliché goes, history repeats itself. Similarly, post-Mao intellectuals sought to reflect, critique, and understand the failure of socialism and Mao's state during the 1949-1976 period.

⁶ Lu Xun (1903-1936), the father of China's modern literature, summarizes the backwardness of Chinese traditional culture as "cannibalistic" in his 1918 short story *Diary of A Madman*.

The New Cultural Movement set up a model that modern Chineseness is often defined in negotiating, frequently distancing Chineseness defined by traditional history and culture. Its ambiguous legacy, as Tu Wei-ming argues in "Cultural China," has brought the "intriguing paradox of iconoclasm and nationalism of the May Fourth generation" (5). One of the prodigies of the May Fourth generation was Mao. Moreover, in Tu's opinion, the generation after uncritically assumes "a total transformation of Chineseness is a precondition for China's modernization" (5). On the one hand, these movements mean revamping traditional culture, rejecting harmful and outdated elements, and critically inheriting its rational components; on the other hand, they mean absorbing the merits of other advanced civilizations (Western civilization) and incorporating them into the new Chinese culture.

However, the New Cultural Movement's elitist and enlightened nature failed, and China in the twentieth century has repeatedly attempted to modernize itself into a liberal democratic nation to no avail. Instead, Communism has taken root in China. Under Mao's leadership, China established itself as a Communist country in 1949. Maoism continued the struggle of the New Cultural Movement but stamped it with Mao's signature of revolutionary ideology, "creative

destruction" and "permanent revolution." As explained by Orville Schell and John Delury in their book *Wealth and Power*, the former means Mao's views on "the need for a violent and totalistic uprooting of China's traditional culture and society" (230); the latter means "Mao's ideological universe of ceaseless contradictions, protracted struggles, and 'permanent revolution' (230).

In place of traditional Confucian ideology and culture, and also in place of Western liberal thoughts and ideas, revolutionary and communist ideology took hold of the national imagination and overrode the definition of what it meant to be Chinese concurrent with notions of modernity and modernization. China's socialist experiment, which began in as early as the 1920s, was an effort to develop internally following a form of Chinese socialism. Mao's plan not only isolated China from the outside world but also attempted to eradicate traditional social structures and feudal practices that were thought to be impeding China's development. At this particular moment in history, national survival and class struggles overwhelmed private matters and individual consciousness.

Mao's ideas and the concept of Communism, which developed during his Yan'an years in the 1930s, established "class struggle" as the main contradiction in the new society. He

continued land reform and collectivized agriculture, and the state started to consolidate and control the industry. Furthermore, more disastrous policies, campaigns, and movements ensued through the years. First was the Anti-Rightist Movement in 1957, which targeted intellectuals with dissident opinions; during this time, millions of intellectuals, including schoolteachers, were sent to labor camp and exiled to the remote areas. The Great Leap Forward (1959-1962) mobilized people to smelt steel and established communes. It caused the three years of famine of reported millions of death as it created a shortage of labor for farming and led to erroneous reports of production numbers. The Cultural Revolution of 1966-1969 led by Mao Zedong was not just a campaign against certain ideas or certain intellectuals but a wholesale attack on the educated elite as well as traditional Chinese culture. It was the last and the most devastating revolution that Mao waged on the nation, causing the collapse and paralysis of the nation; schools closed, youth were sent down to the countryside to learn from the peasants and farmers. The young Red Guards who grow up and come of age during the Cultural Revolution, carry on the iconoclastic impulses under the banner "The Right to Rebel." The violence of the Cultural Revolution inflicted on Chinese citizens was unprecedented in modern Chinese history. The

younger generation was cut off from its cultural roots, and the effects on the intellect of individuals, family structures, and value and belief systems were tremendous. Growing up and coming of age in Mao's China affected individuals' understanding of who they were; of their relationship with the nation; how all these political movements, events, and the ideological control exerted by the state affected their understanding of culture, history, nation, and identity.

In his book *A Bitter Revolution*, Historian Rana Mitter connects the Cultural Revolution to Mao's early days in the May Fourth movement and the New Culture movement; he argues that Mao continued Romanticism and iconoclasm of the early intellectual movement, and he continued to implement his vision in his last revolution. Mitter also points out how youth were mobilized and manipulated because Mao believed in rejuvenating youth, as youth represented China's the future and the continuation of Mao's revolutionary legacy. In Mao's idea, to modernize China was to follow the socialist path, according to the telos, toward the future communism, where everyone lives happily ever after. Mao's modernization projects continued the discourse of modernity and China. Mao continued to destroy the "old culture" in order to establish the new socialist culture. During the Cultural Revolution, the destruction of the "old"

culture took place on a grand scale in a violent way, with burning and looting, and humiliating cultured individuals.

In Mao's socialist state, Mao's vision of "permanent revolution" continued the thesis of compatibility and incompatibility of modernity and China. Communist China continued "modernity" and modernization regarding industrialization in the name of strengthening the country in science, modeled on Soviet-style Communism and Marxism. The rural and urban split continued and expanded in Mao's time; gender roles changed, as women were given equal legal status as men and were encouraged to participate in the labor force. The discourse of race and survival of the nation continued as Mao's China again closed its door to the outside, forced by Cold War mentality. The propagation of a war mentality, keeping vigil of impending enemies inside and outside China, forcefully pulled people together using war tactics and strategy. The state uses it to continue to submerge individual identity within the national crisis. Maoist discourse also placed the individual in the collective ambition and goal for future communism and erased individual identity and identification, in the drive for the general goal of the socialist and communist course. Individualism and bourgeois liberalism were considered cardinal sins

against Communism. By establishing model workers/soldiers/ peasants, the state promoted the archetype of these individuals as an example to emulate, further ignoring diversity and promoting conformity and erasing individuality. Mao's insecurity within China's top leadership catalyzed the paranoia and the continuation of romanticism regarding the individual willpower, which translates into incessant mass mobilization and national campaigns. Mao's socialist projects and experiments ignored individual will, choice, and agency, and wreaked havoc by eradicating traditional culture and proposing instead a totalizing Communist state guided by “class struggle.”

After Mao's death in 1976, China experienced a “cultural fever” in the 1980s, similar to the New Cultural Movement in the 1920s and 1930s a fierce cultural debate among Chinese intellectuals to re-evaluate Mao's years. It was a cultural renaissance with cultural exchanges, works of translation, and new ideas flourishing as China opened its door to the world. It was a cultural self-reflection and a critical re-examination of all aspects of Chinese culture and history. It arose from dissatisfaction and a profound sense of disillusionment with China's revolutionary past, which reduced Chinese culture to rubble. The 1989 Tiananmen student protests, recalling

the May 4, 1919 student protests, were a wake-up call that shattered Chinese intellectuals' sense of themselves and reinstated the identity crisis in China and the Chinese diaspora communities. It is out of this sense of void that these writers, artists, and intellectuals felt compelled to redefine their own culture as they sought to redefine themselves. The identity crisis embedded in the cultural and historical consciousness of "Chineseness" reemerged and became one of the central themes in works by the post-1979 immigrant writers'.

1.2.2. Chineseness and Historical Changes in the United States

For members of the post-1979 immigration generation, such as Yan and Jin, their experience of the crisis of Mao's China was further exacerbated by their immigration to the United States during the opportune time of the 1980s. When the Sinocentric view on the cultural superiority of Chineseness was challenged in the late nineteenth century, China looked outside to Western influence and looked deep inside at its entrenched practices of cultural beliefs. The transnational flow of ideas that began in the late nineteenth century was significant, as is current migration and the immigration wave from China in the post-1979 era that brought a new and expanding understanding of "Chineseness" in the diaspora.

When cultural scholar Rey Chow points out in *Writing Diaspora* (1993) the discrepancies between ethnicity and Chineseness, she writes, “to fully confront the issue of ‘the obsession of ‘China’ [the center], is to “unlearn that submission to one’s ethnicity such as ‘Chineseness’ as the ultimate signified” (25). “The obsession of ‘China’” is literary scholar Chih-tsing Hsia’s observation of Chinese intellectuals’ and scholars’ engagement of writing on China and associating personal identity with national fate, particularly in the time of national crisis (563). Chow suggests one “unlearn that submission” to Chineseness as it is controlled not by the individual but often by the state, the party, and the collective as in the case of Mao's China. The post-1979 immigrant writers seem to answer this call in their writing on Mao’s China. Chow continues to argue that any efforts to theorize Chineseness would be “incomplete without a concurrent problematization of *whiteness* within the broad frameworks of China and Asian studies” (emphasis added, 10). Here Chow points out "Chineseness" produced by China at the center ignores significant "racial other" as defined in the American context; therefore, without explicating the relation between "Chineseness" and "whiteness," the politics and power of class,

gender, race, and ethnicity cannot be adequately addressed. The intersection would provide the analytical and critical strategy for understanding Chineseness in "Chinese immigrant narratives."

In America's racial discourse, "Chineseness" swings on the spectrum of "bad Chinese" and "good Chinese," clearly articulated in "yellow peril" ideology and the myth of "model minority." In the rhetorical swing between "yellow peril" and "model minority," these two labels can sometimes overlap and simultaneously appear in historical time; they become the legacy of how Chineseness has been radicalized in the American context. Frank Chin also famously argued in "Racist Love" with Jeffery Chan in 1972: "The general function of any racial stereotype is to establish and preserve order between different elements of society, maintain the continuity and growth of Western civilization, and enforce white supremacy with a minimum of effort, attention, and expense."⁷ The legislative racism against Chinese creates self-contempt and humiliation among Chinese immigrants, who internalized them as a way of looking at themselves as failures, instead of victims. This is "racist hate." Moreover, "Americanized Chinese" is "the privileged foreigner" who is also "the assimilable alien." The Chinese as a "model minority" is posed as an

⁷ The full article is downloadable here <https://www.radford.edu/.../past.../RACIST%20LOVE%20Chin%20and%20Chan.doc>

exemplary minority against other ethnic groups. This is "racist love." However, whether it is the first or the second social construction, the ideas behind both of them are to treat "Chineseness" as "un-American," either inassimilable or so well assimilated that they are singled out to be emulated by other ethnicities in America. The third category, a "perpetual foreigner" using Ronald Takaki's term, is what truly being viewed as an ethnic marker for "Chineseness"⁸.

At the very beginning, Chinese in America is defined by the racialized rhetoric of inclusion and exclusion in immigration policies, legal practices, and deeply entrenched cultural stereotypes and (un)-acceptance. The first Chinese immigration wave came as laborers in the California Gold Rush (1848-1855). In the 1870s, after the depletion of the gold mines and the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, politicians, intellectual elites, and moral reformers in California continued to rely on public and political discourse that characterized the Chinese as morally degenerate, focusing the public's attention on Chinese women's sexual deviance in particular. The Page Law was passed in 1875 and became the first restrictive federal immigration law and prohibited the entry of immigrants considered "undesirable." This law, in

⁸ Takaki, Ronald T. *Strangers from a Different Shore: a History of Asian Americans*. Penguin Books, 1990.

particular, aimed to curb the phenomenon of Chinese prostitution by restricting and limiting the entry of Chinese women into the United States. The Page Law served as the precursor of the full-scale exclusion of Chinese immigrants by the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. The Act not only prohibited immigration from China but also forbade legal residents from becoming citizens.

What marked Chinese immigrants as different from other European immigrants at the time was a series of legal acts that targeted the Chinese community explicitly in the United States. In California and elsewhere in the American West, anti-miscegenation laws made it illegal for Chinese to marry whites, and alien land acts passed early in the twentieth century denied Chinese the right to own land. The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act forbade the entry of Chinese immigrants into the country.⁹ These anti-Chinese discriminatory legal acts, policies, and regulations severely restricted the formation of a family-based community; a “bachelor society” therefore becomes a signature of Chinatowns and Chinese community in America for the six decades of the Chinese Exclusion Era (1882-1943).

⁹ This Act was repealed in 1943, but the United States did not see a significant Chinese immigration wave until after the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 took effect.

In the late nineteenth century, as America tried to build and maintain a white nation while incorporating the newly gained West frontiers, Chineseness was ethnically and racially targeted as "undesirable" and "unassimilable." China's weak international standing in the late nineteenth century did not help the case. In the Exclusion era (1882-1943), in the time of racial tension, hostility, violence against Chinese, "Chineseness" took on a negative association as filthy, diseased, "alien" or "oriental," religiously heathen and un-Christian. Fundamentally, "Chineseness" was regarded as "the other," and "un-American." In Erika Lee's analysis of the start and the effect of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, she argues that the Chinese Exclusion Act introduced a "gatekeeping ideology"; "it established Chinese immigrants-categorized by their race, class, and gender relations as the ultimate example of the dangerous, degraded alien-as the yardsticks by which to measure the desirability (and "whiteness") of other immigrant groups" (2).

"Yellow peril" in Robert Lee's "The Six Faces of the Oriental" refers to the representation of Asian immigrants as "a threat to nation, race, and family" and "threatened to undermine... 'inner dikes' of the white race" (10). He argues that Asian immigrants were scapegoated for

domestic social and cultural changes at the turn of the twentieth century (10). Even earlier than that, when Chinese were imported as labors in the mining towns, and then for the transcontinental railroads, they were quickly viewed as a threat and met with the hostility first by California labor unions and later by national campaigns against Chinese immigration, which crystallized in the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. That Act singles out a particular ethnicity and bars their entry for the first time in U.S. immigration history.

When the political tide shifts and international scene changes, Chinese during the two-world war era were marked by a sharp shift of positive portrayal of Chinese in media, public, and politics, as China became American allies in World War II. The Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1934, and a small quota of 106 Chinese was allowed to immigrate annually.

Exclusionist policies had handicapped the Chinese community for six decades, which severely inhibited the formation of the Chinese family in the United States and correspondingly, the growth of the second generation of Chinese American. The reception of Chinese in America improved in the post-World War II era, as the second and third generation Chinese (Asian) American community grew, particularly after the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act. An

act that has repealed century-long history of a series of Asian exclusionist acts has opened the door for Asian immigrants¹⁰. After the 1965 Act, America experienced significant social and cultural shifts in domestic politics and in the cultural realm, as the civil rights movement and anti-Vietnam protests continued to raise ethnic pride and racial awareness. Asian American identity was born in the students' activism at San Francisco State University, with demands for an ethnic studies curriculum that was relevant to and reflective of their experiences.

In the 1970s and onward, the widespread media reports on the success stories of Asian American children and of Asian American families and communities doing well in school and careers, of them becoming assimilated into the larger American society. Stereotypically, Chineseness was seen as a sign of being smart, hardworking, and law-abiding, and contributing to a highly educated and disciplined labor force. Chineseness was presented as an image of "productivity, savings, and mobility" (Robert Lee 11). However, Chineseness became part of the construct of the "model minority" myth and, as argued by Robert Lee, "the model minority

¹⁰ A large number of Asian immigrants from diverse Asian origins have considerably changed Asian American demography in America. Among the quickly inflated number of Asian immigrants, 65% of the Asian Americans are Asian-born by early 1990s (Susan Koshy 322).

mythology substituted a narrative of national modernization and ethnic assimilation through heterosexuality, familiarism, and consumption" (10). His argument portrays all six different faces of the oriental in the popular imagination: the pollutant, the coolie, the deviant, the yellow peril, the model minority and the gook. Lee argues that these images are all directed at "portray[ing] the Oriental as an alien body and a threat to the American national family" (8).

Throughout history, American racial discourse manipulates the images to its benefit, frequently scapegoating, or substituting, in order to construct a national narrative to maintain a power structure and white privilege. As Lee frequently points out, national economic crises often induce these shifts and changes, but more "the popular discourse of race in which these constructions of the Oriental were produced and deployed is not a transparent or unmediated reflection of the economy, but rather an expression of social contradictions drawing on images of the present, visions for the future, and memories of the past" (11).

Therefore, as the pendulum swings across the different national crisis points of American history, it is imperative to recognize that Chineseness is foremost a skin color, with racial and ethnical undertones. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha argues that skin "is recognized as

'common knowledge' in a range of cultural, political and historical discourses," and in colonial societies, it "plays a public part in the racial drama that is enacted every day" (78). The Chinese immigrant is regarded as an earliest ethnic and racial "other" through immigration to dominant white society. As Bhabha points out, the "difference of the object of discrimination is at once visible and natural-color as the cultural/political sign of inferiority or degeneracy, skin as its natural '*identity*'" (80; original emphasis) Skin, a signifier of stereotyped racial and cultural difference, then, enables the structuring of a value system that accords political and economic power to the ruling power, such that race continues to play a major role in the cultural construction of the immigrant (96).

In this dissertation, I take Chineseness to be an open signifier, a fluid and contested category that encompasses a diversity of political, "racial," and ethnic meanings within varied and shifting contexts in the immigrant literature. Chineseness, like all axes of identity, is not a fixed or bounded category, and its meaning only becomes relevant as people use it as a tool to define themselves in relation to others. In his article "On Not Speaking Chinese," Ien Ang writes, "In the midst of the postmodern flux of nomadic subjectivities we need to recognize the

continuing and continuous operation of ‘fixing’ performed by the categories of race and ethnicity, as well as class, gender, geography and so on in the formation of ‘identity’” (5). But I would also caution against Chineseness being seen as “an amorphous essence waiting to be recovered, claimed, and formed into a basis for identification,” as Louie Andrew writes, “it is important to see “a dimension of identity that is contested and shaped within power relations and becomes salient in different ways in various contexts” (21).

In “Chinese immigrant narrative,” both Jin and Yan feature transnational subjectivity that questions Chineseness in Chinese/American identity formation. This doubleness of subject formation includes both insider and outsider perspectives for the subject in a bordered space between nation’s exterior and interior. Although it has brought with it constant anxiety regarding home and homeland, roots and routes, it has also given a sense of liberation and the opportunity to develop a dual perspective on Chineseness. On the one hand, there is the “decentering” of “Chineseness” from the cultural center China. On the other hand, there is the discourse of “Chineseness” embedded in the Chinese American identity in the American context. As first-generation immigrant authors, both writers create an alternative space to represent the struggle

their characters experienced, the challenges of displacement, and alienation in the new land. This new transnational immigrant consciousness emerges from a transnational framework that complicates identity politics in the narratives of both authors.

1.3. Summary of Chapters

Post-1979 immigrant writers are concerned with both deconstructing the meaning of Chineseness from the center that predominantly features in their “China narrative” to the peripheral that has a strong presence in “Chinese immigrant narrative.” I organize the dissertation into two parts: Chapter 2 explores the identity crisis in “China narrative,” and Chapter 3 engages in Chinese immigrant narrative. Each part explores the contested meaning of Chineseness in the representative works by Ha Jin and Geling Yan. The works include Ha Jin’s two novels *Waiting* (1999) and *A Free Life* (2007), and Geling Yan’s novella *White Snake* (1999), and a novel, *The Lost Daughter of Happiness* (2001).

Chapter 2 vigorously engages their analyses of how Chineseness takes on meanings in intersections with the writers’ thematic concerns with national history, class, gender and cultural identity in Mao’s era. As argued earlier, both writers are interested in writing historical fiction,

and their work deeply engages a critical reflection on being a Chinese caught in several particular moments in Mao's China. In this chapter, I examine how Ha Jin deconstructs Chineseness determined by political ideology and cultural and historical forces and how Geling Yan has demonstrated robust feminist approaches to her work.

In Chapter 2.1, "The Superfluous Man': Male Identity Crisis in Ha Jin's *Waiting* (1999)," I investigate how Ha Jin has deconstructed Chineseness by recreating and re-imagining a Mao's China, through eighteen years of waiting from 1966-1984. Complicit in the system, Chinese intellectuals suffer from their unexamined loyalty to the notion of "Chineseness," which is frequently associated with nation and party-state. The state interpellates the self. The state has an invasive, pervasive, and omnipresent power in the private life of Lin and in his struggle in settling into a life with a woman he desires renders the failure of socialism and Maoism.

This individual male is allegorically impotent, castrated by the state. "The superfluous man," is the extra, the life of a man suspended in waiting in futility and defeat for the possible consummation of marriage, a most private choice, and matter and life. The failure of the individual exemplifies the failure of Maoism and Maoist socialism. He is constricted, limited by

his sense of self, the lack of choice, and the lack of the representational power. The two women in his life exemplify the two products of social and historical products, irreconcilable. The story constitutes Ha Jin's historical imagination and his negotiation of a historical and cultural legacy that signifies "Chineseness" in Mao's years. The protagonist's sense of loss of self is indicative of the crisis of the nation, of unclear direction, and the claustrophobic nature of the military hospital compound, just like the closed-in nation at the time. When China is closed in by the Cold War, Mao's leadership runs the country from one disaster to another, and an individual human is a sacrificial figure for the construction of the new Maoist nation. The crisis of self in Kong Lin's case is the crisis of the nation, as it runs the course of Maoism, hitting one dead end after another. It allegorizes the continued struggle of the entanglement of the individual fate and the fate of the nation, in the time of national crisis.

In Chapter 2.2, "'The Snake Woman': Questioning Sexuality and Gender Identity in Geling Yan's *White Snake* (1999)," I explore how Geling Yan engaged in our discussion of "Chineseness" from a feminist perspective. *White Snake and Other Stories*, Geling Yan's first English translation, is a collection of five short stories and the novella of the titled piece. In her

writing of China, Geling Yan created mesmerizing woman characters from the 1960s to 1970s China. In "White Snake," Sun Likun, a thirty-four-year-old political prisoner, and a former dancer falls in love with a magnetic young man ostensibly sent by the government to interrogate her for her counterrevolutionary sins. The investigator is actually a young woman. In exploring the intricacy of female/female relationship, Geling Yan's characters defy heteronormativity and question the relationship among gender, identity, and national ideology.

Yan approaches Sun Likun not only in terms of the nation-state's power of defining its Chinese subject but precisely, the gendered Chineseness defined by revolutionary and Communist rhetoric that problematize Chineseness through gendered experience. In this chapter, I argue that Yan has a strong feminist approach in positioning women characters at the center of their narratives with the emphasis on female subjectivity and the critique of Mao's patriarchal ideology and institutions. In her contribution to "Feminism and Global Chineseness: The Cultural Production of Controversial Women Authors," Aijun Zhu writes, "The different definitions of Chineseness, Eurocentric or Sino-centric or other, result from competition in the hierarchy of power. To be exact, it is a competition of nationalistic masculinity, depending very

much on ethnic gender and sexual boundaries” (45). Geling Yan tends to grapple with the problem of subjectivity in connection with gender and explore the relationship of the female subject to the power and dominant ideology in which her gendered self is inscribed. She stresses body politics defined by Mao's era and Maoism in Likun's trained dancer's body. The display of a feminine body on stage heighten the beauty of a woman's body and counter Mao's discourse of the disappearance and masculinization of woman's body. Maoist discourse on women emphasized their social/economic function, yet ignored gender difference, and therefore erased the femininity and body of women. The silence on female homosexuality also poses the problem and invites further questions into gender and women's sexual identity during Mao's time.

In the decentering transnational movement of the two writers, the contested “Chineseness” embedded in their transnational experiences, further demonstrated in their portrayal of immigrant subjects in immigrant narratives. In Chapter 3, “Chinese Immigrant Narratives: Chinese in America,” I turn to their work narrating Chinese immigrant experiences in America. Both writers demonstrate this shift in their writing at certain points in their careers. These texts feature immigrant subjectivities, engaging Jin and Yan in contesting Chineseness in the context of

contemporary and historical Chinese immigrant experiences. Representative works of the writers' immigrant narratives include Ha Jin's semi-autobiographic fiction, *A Free Life* (2007), and Geling Yan's historical fiction *The Lost Daughter of Happiness* (2001). From China center to Chinese diaspora, both writers continue the discourse on Chineseness by decentering its meaning across national, linguistic, temporal, and ideological borders. In addition to the already complicated historical and gender consciousness we have covered in the previous chapter, in Chapter 3, the "Chineseness" is caught in a new web of signifiers, in particular, race and ethnicity, complicating the Chinese/American identity formation.

Chapter 3.1 is entitled "Chinese/American Immigrant Identity: Renegotiating Homeland, Language, and Freedom in Ha Jin's *A Free Life* (2007)." *A Free Life* marks a transnational turn in Jin's narratives, transitioning from "China narratives" to "immigrant narratives." After more than twenty years residing in the United States. Ha Jin feels removed from his homeland and also more confident to write about America. There is an interesting dichotomy in renegotiating "Chineseness" in his "immigrant narratives." His critique of "Chineseness" runs together with his critique of "Americanness" in the novel, as painstakingly an immigrant consciousness and

subjectivity come to fore in the protagonist Nan Wu's struggling with his identity in his newly adopted land, America, after the pivotal moment of the Tiananmen protests. In the process of coming to terms with his immigrant identity, Nan has to deal with becoming an independent man. Nan has to negotiate his Maoist/Communist past when the state took care of the individual in return for the citizen's subservience and loyalty to the state. Nan's efforts at decentering Chineseness is represented by his negotiation of the two deeply rooted cultural identifiers in the diaspora and immigrant community, which are homeland and language. In detaching home from "homeland," Nan opens up a new space for his home, enabling it to belong to the place he builds with his family. Moreover, in aspiring and struggling to become an English-language poet, Nan tries to distance him from the linguistic betrayal he felt from the linguistic violence instigated by Mao's politics. Additionally, he also seeks a new expressive and artistic perspective by adopting another language. Nan's acculturation to "Americanness" has taken the forms of economic independence, financial responsibility, and then artistic/cultural acculturation in his aspiration to become an English-language poet.

In the novel, the tension of the exile's subjectivity in choosing between China and his quest for freedom stems from his (dis)identifying with "Chineseness." In the novel, Ha Jin continues to shed light on the precarious position a Chinese intellectual maintains. He enhances our understanding of a contemporary Chinese immigrant's struggle to define what constitutes his own Chinese/ American identity. In the economic struggle, Nan comes to critique the materialistic aspect of the American dream of an immigrant family, and in trying to become an English-language poet, he also delivers a sharp critique that what has been denied to the immigrant writer/ artist/ community is the voice from an immigrant, whose artistic ambition is often crushed, whose cultural representations are often missing. Therefore, the immigrant community becomes a voiceless, faceless, marginalized existence, lacking representation. This part of acculturation is denied access to the immigrant artist.

Similarly, in unpacking the burden of Maoist Chineseness in the immigrant community, Yan focuses less on the politics but more on body politics by focusing on women's immigrant experiences. In Chapter 3.2 entitled "Visuality, Sexuality and Gendered Chineseness: Geling Yan's *The Lost Daughter of Happiness* (2001)," her critique of "Chineseness" continues in what

has been laid out in her “China narratives”; this is a critique of erasure and denial of women's sexuality, body, and subjectivity. These women in Yan's portrayal are sexualized women who know their power and use it to get out of China, to seek opportunity, and create a different life somewhere else. In her critique of Americanness, through the callous and cruel racial logic in *The Lost Daughter of Happiness*, Yan narrates across space and time a story of the mid-nineteen-century Chinatown prostitute Fusang, who was abducted from southern China. The narrator is a contemporary woman, who self-identifies as a fifth-generation Chinese American, married to a white American. Chineseness is inscribed on Fusang's body with exotic three-inch feet. The collective voice of women, past and present, give weight to the collective memories of Chinese women and their experiences in America.

In conclusion, I will touch on "Chineseness" in the post-Mao era, and the continuous metamorphosis of being Chinese as the country navigates the path of economic reform for the past four decades and has moved away from Maoism toward freewheeling capitalism with a still-strong, authoritarian Communist Party leadership. The constitutional and ideological contradiction, as in Mao's time, is difficult to resolve. I also emphasize how this project adds to

our understanding "Chineseness" in its historical, cultural, racial, and gender complexities.

Finally, I reiterate how this dissertation will contribute to expanding current research on Chinese

American literary studies, American Studies, Chinese Studies, transnational studies, diaspora

studies and woman's studies.

CHAPTER 2. CHINA NARRATIVES: MAO'S CHINA AND ITS REVOLUTIONARY LEGACY

2.1 "The Superfluous Man": Male Identity Crisis in Ha Jin's *Waiting* (1999)

The novel is set in Mao's China, spanning eighteen years from 1966 to 1984. It covers roughly a period beginning at the start of the Cultural Revolution in the mid-1960s and ending during the Four Modernizations in the early 1980s. Kong Lin, an army doctor, is caught between two women: Shuyu, his illiterate peasant wife by an arranged marriage, and Manna Wu, the educated modern nurse whom he loves. He wants desperately to divorce Shuyu so he can marry Manna, but a host of obstacles stand in the way: Shuyu's reluctance, the opposition of Lin's relatives and other villagers, the Communist bureaucracy, and the rule prohibiting divorce by a single party until eighteen years have elapsed. Lin married Manna when they were in early and mid-forties, and after they had twins, Manna was taken ill and expected to die soon. The happy unions quickly dissipated and gloom and sadness overtook Lin's life.

In the novel, Ha Jin creates authentic socialist rural and urban backdrops, the space inhabited by the two women, Shuyu and Manna. We are presented with these two worlds in *Waiting* as Lin tries to divorce Shuyu every year for 18 years to no avail. The rural and urban

split and strict population mobility control during Mao's time imply that these two women's lives hardly collide and are place-bound. At the very end of the story when Kong Lin divorces Shuyu and marries Manna in Muji City and relocates Shuyu and their daughter Hua to the city as a benefit of his twenty years' service in the military hospital. The deep-rooted patriarchal and Confucian traditions have a stronghold in the rural community where Shuyu lives. In the military compound, where Lin and Manna work and live, is a world affected more by Maoism and Communist bureaucracy. For eighteen years, Kong Lin makes a yearly trip of ten days from Muji City to the Goose Village, struggling between spaces, between the two women, and between the two strong ideologies represented by the two spaces: Confucianism and Maoism. Caught in between worlds, the individual self is constantly under assault. Selfhood is smothered, and it never gets a chance to develop, as various external constraints cause it to shift and sway. Lin's struggle in deciding the most private individual matter, marriage and divorce, is eroded by external forces. After eighteen years of waiting, Lin's sudden realization that he is "a superfluous man" in life indicates the smothered self at its crisis; various factors are at play that renders the protagonist unable to walk out of patriarchal family control and then the party-state control. The

fundamental life decision in defining what love is, what family means, what life means on their terms has been superposed by the Party-State, as well as by traditional Confucian values.

The story takes place during a time of a major political change and social transformation. Instead of focusing on the dramatic or catastrophic, Jin focuses in *Waiting* on the mundane impacts of Mao's Communist rule. The public events that we know occurred during that time—demonstrations by Red Guards, the rustication of city youth or it is called “sent-down” youth, the Nixon visit, the starting and dismantling of the communes, etc.—do not occupy the novel's central state. Private lives of individuals living through the time, such as Shuyu, Manna, and Lin, are foregrounded. In the novel, Ha Jin's critically reflects upon the eighteen years of waiting, which are, metaphorically, eighteen years of Mao's rule and its effects upon individuals who live through this history. In doing so, Jin grounds the narrative within a historical context, and he underpins that history simultaneously in a matter of large public events and small private lives. Individuals lives are part of the same current: the force that causes history to happen at the same time drives Manna, Lin, and Shuyu to meet their destinies.

Lin's inability to divorce Shuyu, on the one hand, is predicated on the Confucius ethics and codes that transcend the practice of law and favor Shuyu; on the other hand, his inability to marry Manna is complicated by the fact of the Communist bureaucracy and the sexual, moral, and behavior codes Maoism dictates. In the equal representation of rural and urban life, Jin gives us insight into the mechanistic and dehumanizing world of China that governs the lives of Lin, Manna Wu, and Shuyu. The story presents many conflicting phenomena and delves deep into the contradictions of Mao's Communist logic. Paradoxical pairs of relations between individual history and national history, individual self and State, and individual self and Confucianism and Maoism all contest an identity crisis of "Chineseness" under Mao's rule. In the Goose Village, Ha Jin presents us with a rural world and its cultural value systems untouched as yet by Maoism. In the Muji city, the urban space demonstrates the pervasive power of Maoist indoctrination and ideology that infiltrates private space and determines individual life.

In this chapter, I argue that, in the allegorical tale of a triangular love story, Jin offers a sharp critique of the failure of Maoism. Lin has struggled to perform the changing codes of Chineseness, maintaining personal and communal ties within both the rural and urban space. The

lack of private space, the public discourse, and ideology are often pervasive in individual thoughts and life. The Chineseness expunged by Maoism is a strict ideological and thought control including body control. It disables individual will and strips individuals of their choices. Filial piety, a value associated with traditional Chinese values, appears to remain unscathed by the forces of modernity. However, Communist logic is contradictory; even as it calls to get rid of the old, it also perpetuates the old, in a different way. The Party-State substitutes for the family and continues the practice of patriarchy. Both Shuyu and Manna suffer in Mao's China, which continues the patriarchy that puts women down. Women's liberation is a failed discourse, as the Communist state apparatus, including institutions, law, and party orders continue its paternalistic feature in the cities. As Lin was not able to rebel against his father's will and avoid an arranged marriage, Lin is also without power to stand up against the state's ridiculous rule that prohibits him from marrying Manna. The new manhood is also at risk. The cultural tradition and the ridiculous rule destroy individuality, rendering the male subject effeminate and a "superfluous" figure, as embodied by Jin's main protagonist.

2.1.1. The Village: Shuyu and Confucianism

Throughout the novel, Ha Jin gives readers many opportunities to see the rural world and its cultural values system untouched by the Cultural Revolution. In the prologue, on his annual ten days' leave to visit his family in the Goose Village, far away from Muji City, where Lin Kong works in an army hospital, Lin describes his home in this way:

Beside him, chickens were strutting and geese waddling. A few little chicks were passing back and forth through the narrow gaps in the paling that fenced a small vegetable garden. In the garden pole beans and long cucumbers hung on trellises, eggplants curved like ox horns, and lettuce heads were so robust that they covered up the furrows. In addition to poultry, his wife kept two pigs and a goat for milk. Their sow was oinking from the pigpen, which was adjacent to the western end of the vegetable garden....From the kitchen, where Shuyu was cooking, came the coughing of the bellows. In the south, elm and birch crowns shaded their neighbor's straw and tiled roofs. Now and then a dog barked from one of these homes. (4)

This passage captures the aestheticized version of Lin's countryside. On the surface, it looks like Jin's description of Lin's rural life is a call for an old pre-modern world, pure rural heaven best represented by writer Shen Congwen (1902-1988), who is known for his nostalgic and idyllic portrayal of the countryside in the war-torn era of the 1930s. Compared with Shen's depiction of rural China in the 1930s, Jin's scene shows much has been conserved, and the loss of the past is hardly visible in this village now under Communist rule.

Confucian ethics are still dominant in the rural areas. Shuyu, Lin's country wife, who adheres to traditional values faithfully and best represents the countryside and the continuation of preserved cultural traditions. Lin and Shuyu's marriage conforms to rural traditions, although they were married in 1962, long after the liberation of China in 1949. Lin's father, who was concerned that Lin's ill mother would have no one to take care of her, initiated the marriage. Lin agreed "to let his parents find a wife for him" out of "filial duty" (8). A matchmaker is consulted, and a match is made with Shuyu. During the twenty years, Lin was away serving in the army hospital, Shuyu attended his mother diligently until the old woman died; then she cared for his bedridden father for three years until he died and brought up their baby girl, Hua, alone. In 1966,

the fourth year into the marriage, Lin started to date Manna, whom he met in the hospital. From then on, every year, Lin pays a yearly visit home with a mission to divorce Shuyu. In his absence from the family, Shuyu performed extraordinarily well, first as a daughter-in-law to Lin's family and then as a mother to Hua. She did this all without the help of Lin, though Lin financially supported the family because he can only spend ten days' annual leave with the family. When Lin could not make it home when his father passed away in 1969 because the military was in a state of war emergency, Shuyu arranged the funeral together with the family. Lin's absence from the family is a difficult thing for Shuyu, and at a certain point Lin realizes that Shuyu must be "very lonely" (96).

Although it is true that Shuyu lacks Manna's education and passion, she is always shown as being steadfast and consistent, and she embodies the traditional ideal of *lienu* 烈女. "The cultural legacy informing the production of the official discourse was the classical *lienu* (virtuous women) tradition, according to which women were honored for sexual chastity, loyalty to their betrothed and husbands and filiality to their parents-in-law" (O'Hara qtd. in Evans 21). When Lin is home, she cooks, takes care of the households, the daughter, and attempts to make another son

with Lin. During Lin's home visit in 1970, the first year Lin wants to propose a divorce, the couple had not slept together for four years. In the evening, Shuyu walks into Lin's room and asks to stay with him for the night. She said she wants a son to help in their old age. Lin quickly rejects the idea as being "feudal" (95). Shuyu is frugal, managing the money Lin sends her so well she can return some of it to him. Though illiterate, she keeps a grocery list with drawings, in which the "small bottle stood for vinegar, the bottle for soy sauce, the jar for cooking oil, the star for salt, the square for soap..." (91). Furthermore, she has respect for tradition and makes sure the traditional cultural practices are observed. For example, after both of Lin's parents are dead, she makes sure that their graves are well cared for. Every time Lin comes home, he feels comfortable, he is well fed and well taken care of, and he enjoys the rural life, in the idyllic description as mentioned above. It is a simple, comfortable life.

If Lin did not marry Shuyu for love, then what about Shuyu? What does she think about the marriage and her place in marriage? She seems to like Lin because she thinks he is handsome; she knew they were not a good match, so she tries to make it up by being a good wife and mother. She takes her role more as a responsibility and bows readily to male authority. Her realization of

her life is through the male connections. She conforms to these traditions and challenges nothing, which made her into a selfless person with the total surrender of the individual self.

Confucianism underwent a revival in Song dynasty (1127-1279 AD), particularly in the form of *dao xue* 道学, or the “Learning of the Way,” which taught women to obey their fathers at home, their husbands after marriage, and their sons in old age. Following a traditional pattern for womanhood, she obeys her husband unconditionally. Every time Lin asks her consent for a divorce, Shuyu always says “all right” to divorce in front of Lin, yet, for the eighteen years, “she had always changed her mind at the last moment when the judge asked if she would accept a divorce” (3). She would cry and be unable to speak on her behalf.

According to January Lim, “The Confucian political philosophy is foregrounded in patriarchy, a structure that is based on stratified relations....And in the pantheon of Confucian ethics, the most important values are unquestioning allegiance and obedience of subjects to authority” (144-145). In the family, it is demonstrated as “filial piety.” As Heiner Roetz put it, “the survival of Chinese culture has been attributed to the influence of *xiao*, filial piety” (53). Filial piety can be defined as “a natural feeling of responsibility and as an expression of gratitude

which makes good the pains that parents took for their child" (Roetz 54). The concept of filial piety is complex, comprising a range of virtues such as moral obligation, respect toward the elders of the family, and fraternal deference.

A major reason Lin is dissatisfied with his marriage to Shuyu is that Lin feels that she is socially unacceptable to his friends and colleagues. When he first meets Shuyu: "she looked so old, as if in her forties, her face wrinkled and her hands leathery. What is more, her feet were only four inches long. This was the New China: who would look up to a young woman with bound feet?" (8). Her unpresentable look and illiteracy make her unsuitable and unequal match to Lin, who is college educated and trained as an army doctor. Her bound feet, an outdated practice in the New China (post-1949), further remove her away from her time and makes Lin even more uncomfortable.

Her illiteracy and her bound feet hold her back in the traditional way: an inability to articulate or have a voice and her inability to venture away from the family. She is physically and mentally bound to the patriarchy system. Her circle of activities includes the family house, the market, and occasional visits to the graveyard of Lin's parents. Her physical space is limited

since she cannot venture far, as Lin drilled a well in the house so she will not go a long way to fetch water. Lin never invites her to his military hospital for fear that people will laugh at her anti-chronological demeanor and particularly her bound feet. In the novel, Shuyu's bound feet are like her illiteracy; her shortcomings are complemented by her diligence, hard work, care, and love. She is neither a victim of an old practice nor someone who has ways and means to get out of the miserable situation she is in. She ends up waiting for Kong Lin's return even after he marries Manna at the end of the novel.

Shuyu treats her bound feet as a precious part of her body, an eroticized site saved for her husband. When Shuyu eventually moves to Muji City, people ask her to look at her bound feet out of curiosity, and she responds, "No, can't do that." (205) She explains that as a rule "only my man's allowed to see them" (206). "Take off your shoes and socks is like open your pants." "Cause you bound your feet only for your future husband, not for other men, to make your feet more precious to your man." "The Golden Lotus is like a treasure." The reason that Shuyu bound her feet is that "Mother said it's my second chance to marry good, cause my face ugly" (206).

Ironically, when asked whether Dr. Kong likes them, Shuyu is puzzled and mumbled she doesn't know because "he never saw them." (206).

The bound feet represent the oppression of Chinese women in traditional China when the ideology of Confucianism dominates. As I argued in Chapter 3.2, the "bound feet" are a physical manifestation of what being a woman means in traditional China. As an extreme form, the patriarchal system asked the woman to be sexually appealing while restricting them in the physical space, usually in the inner quarters of a natal family and then a married home. The practice itself imposed physical pain since girlhood, inhibited the natural growth of the foot arch, and had to be maintained for years before the less than four-inch feet were formed. For a time, bound feet were considered an aesthetic thing for genteel ladies and a fetish on the men's side. They were considered an essential part of a woman's body and should never be revealed to any other person other than the husband. This gave the husband the only license to enjoy and to play with them for their sexual arousal or sexual experience.

Shuyu's image becomes allegorically and symbolically rich in this way. She does not represent a woman of her generation but an old generation of woman, possibly before the 1949

liberation of China or even further back in Imperial China. For centuries, most women were not educated, and many bound their feet for the reasons mentioned above. Shuyu's total submission and conformity to her gender roles stem from her respect for authority, authoritarian figures, and the patriarchy structure.

She reverts tradition and conforms to traditions, and thus, in turn, is the beneficiary of the tradition. Before marriage, Lin's mother says that she is a "good woman," and later Lin's brother Ren Kong also says to Lin that Shuyu is a good woman. Lin himself acknowledged more than once that she is a good woman. Shuyu's good qualities are part of the reason Lin has had difficulty in divorcing her. As we recall, his first attempt at divorce fails, for he is touched by Shuyu's frugality, piety, and steadfastness. Over the years, Lin realizes that "It would make no sense to anybody in the countryside if Lin said he wanted to divorce his wife because he didn't love her. He had to find a real fault in her, which he couldn't. People here would not laugh about her bound feet, and he did not feel ashamed of her in the village....He was certain that if a villager asked him about Shuyu, he would admit she was a perfect wife" (94).

In Jin's sympathetic portrayal of her and rural China, she represents backward practices, such as bound feet, that subjugate women to men, to the subsidiary position in all aspects of their social, cultural, and economic lives. However, it would be a mistake to say that Shuyu is a victim of the traditional patriarchy system. Even though we see her tragedy in not being able to gain her husband's love, she won her husband's respect by being a good and loyal wife and mother and daughter-in-law to his family. She also represents the good sides of the Confucian ethics system that was destroyed by Maoist sweeping revolutionary ideas, which tried to eradicate the ethical responsibility system that called for people to take care of each other. It also made it harder for Lin to divorce Shuyu as both traditional and political forces back her. The relatives, the judge, and even the neighbor villagers represented the traditional forces. The communal voice in the rural village supports Shuyu, who was regarded as a good wife and a good mother. The villagers have sympathy for her. The villagers still uphold ethics that indicate that when a woman is not at fault, there is no good reason to leave her.

Each time Shuyu was asked for a divorce, her brother would accompany her to the court in the town and argue for her in the court. He also organized a protest in front of the court during

one of the divorce appeals. In 1983, seventeen years into the divorce battle, Bensheng argued for Shuyu in court, saying to the judge “She has lived with Kongs for more than twenty years, serving them like a dumb beast of burden.... This is unfair. He can’t treat a human being, his wife, like an overcoat—once he has worn it out, he dumps it” (12).

Lin's elder brother Ren Kong came to talk to Lin once regarding the divorce issue and caution him not to divorce Shuyu, telling him nobody finds fault with Shuyu, and she has done nothing wrong. Therefore Lin cannot divorce her. Ren also worries that the event affects his son when the local community spreads rumors about the immoral nature of Lin's divorce rationale.

Below is the conversation between Ren and Lin about Lin's divorce case:

“Brother, you should’ve talked to me before going to the court with Shuyu,”

.....

“This is my personal matter,” Lin said tersely.

“But our parents chose Shuyu for you. Shouldn’t you respect their wish?”

“It’s their wish that messed up my life.’

“Why so?” ...he added, “A man ought to have a conscience. I can’t see where Shuyu is not worthy of you. She’s given everything to our family. We should take—”

“Like I said, this is my personal matter.”

“Maybe not. A divorce will affect everyone in our family. Kids in my village have already started calling your nephew names, saying, ‘Your uncle has two wives,’ or, ‘Your uncle is a womanizer.’ How can you say divorce is just your own affair?” (128).

The dialogue demonstrates the conflicts between the two brothers’ points of view regarding marriage and divorce. They also represent two kinds of thoughts on marriage matter. Even though Lin repetitively argues from a “personal” point of view, Ren’s more Confucian upbringing brings out the concept of family in the Confucian traditional sense and emphasizes that marriage is not a private matter but a matter of a whole family. In the *Book of Rites*, a classic Confucian text: “Marriage is the happy union of two families of different names, with a view, in

the upward way, to perform ritual duties to the ancestor and, in the downward way, to secure the continuance of the family line. Therefore, the gentleman sets a great value upon it.”¹¹

In Ren’s opinion, Lin cannot divorce Shuyu on three accounts: firstly, Lin’s parents choose Shuyu. It is against parents' wish, therefore an un-filial act to divorce Shuyu. Secondly, Shuyu is a good woman; there's no moral ground to divorce Shuyu. Thirdly, the marriage and divorce matter is a family matter that will affect the whole family’s standing in the community, and Ren should be consulted.

For Shuyu, her country folks and Lin’s brother, Lin’s attempt to divorce was morally irresponsible and wrong in the traditional Confucians way. In court, the court judge often cites moral reasons to refuse to grant Lin a divorce. The judicial system is supposed to be part and parcel of communist ideological apparatuses, carrying out the new marriage Law (1950) establishes. The Law grants individuals “freedom” in marriage and divorce. Instead of seeing the divorce as a legal right that Lin is entitled, one of the court judge in his verdict says, “A man who doesn’t care for his family and loves the new and loathes the old—fickle in heart and unfaithful

¹¹ *Liji*, Chapter 42, p. 791. The English version is as translated by James Legge in *Li Chi, Book of Rites* (New Hyde Park, NY: University Books, 1967), with minor modifications.

in words and deeds....This is immoral and dishonorable, absolutely intolerable. Tell me, do you have a conscience or not? Do you deserve your green uniform and the red star on your cap?" (12).

In his dissertation on "Narrative of Modern Chinese Masculinity in Ha Jin's Fiction," Lezhou Su argues that the judge's moral trial is based on the grounds of Confucian ethics and moral principles such as conscience (*liangxin* 良心), benevolence (*ren* 仁), and loyalty (*zhong* 忠) (87).

The four pillars of Confucius ethics are loyalty (*Zhong*), filial piety (*Xiao*), benevolence (*Ren*), fair and justice (*Yi*). The Communist judicial system represented by the verdict of this judge and by numerous court appeals Lin has to go through over the years, illustrate another important point: the Confucian ethics not only has a stronghold in traditional cultural practice in the village, but the communist system inherits it and make it part of its practice. The judge's reproach of Lin as Su argues "illustrates how Confucian ethics were incorporated into the political discourse of the Communist party" (87).

Rebelling against a father's wish or family patriarch's decision is the first step a man takes to remove himself from traditional practices, which at the time were seen as outdated, tyrannical, cannibalistic, suffocating, and disabling. Lin's tragedy stems from caving into his father's request

for him to be married because the family needs another woman to provide care. His inability to rebel against his father and his family's wish sets in motion the future events. Lin was shocked by Shuyu's unpleasant appearance, but even more so by her bound feet in the 1960s. What he realizes then is that the bound feet, so outdated a practice, marked Shuyu's presence as anti-chronological in the Maoist time, which advocates marriage should be based on freedom of choice. His parents persuaded him that good looks don't count and there is nothing wrong with Shuyu, she is a good woman and will be a good wife. In a traditional rural area, the traditional practice continues, as do moral judgments and economic co-dependence. Shuyu's parents consider that Lin is educated and will be a doctor, and so ask for no money from the family. Lin's inability to fight this logic and persuade his folks otherwise, or just to walk out on the family, speaks about how deeply affected he is by being a filial son to his parents, who spent all their money on his education and brought him up as a fine doctor. His gratitude later shows how he felt he owes much to his older brother, who was stripped of the opportunity to be educated so that Lin could have his opportunity.

Later in court, Lin's battle in divorcing Shuyu will run into the same line of argument, which holds that the moral power stands with Shuyu and marriage as the modern concept of love does not work in rural areas. The early revolutionary slogan of "freedom" in marriage choice and in liberation from the patriarchal family still have control and decide the lives of Shuyu and Kong Lin. They fall into the victimhood of the old sage practice of arranged marriage and then the Confucian ethics of communal care and filial piety. Rural communities, with their insularity, remoteness, and male domination, were an unlikely environment for the seeds for the "modern family" to grow. As Harris Evans observes, "In the 1950s, the standards of sexual morality considered consistent with the free-choice model of marriage generally presupposed access to the educational and social opportunities associated with urban living" (24).

The old values of Chinese have deeper roots in the rural areas. "Love" is a modern concept in marriage; traditionally, marriage is for the sake of family survival, and matchmaking efforts were usually based on the economic considerations of families. These arrangements have caused many ill-matched and unhappy marriages, particularly from women's perspectives, when they have even less choice, to begin with. Love and romantic love are modern concepts that were

inspiring in the early time of revolution in the 1920s when young people were seeking out alternatives to the arranged life dictated by tradition. The rebellion against family, mainly against arranged marriages, was a big factor in inspiring young people to join the revolution. The family obligation, filial piety, is replaced by revolutionary love, the love based on the same passion of comradeship. Free love epitomizes liberation from family and social conventions. The rebellious new generation of youth starts a revolt against tradition, epitomized in the structure of the family, a revolt that is personal as well as political. The arranged marriages become the target of a new generation of youth. "Freedom" is the freedom to choose their partners, to seek partnership based on the new concept of "love," and love to them was based on mutual interests, common goals, and later were further detailed in Communist terms as "comradeship." Revolution and love become entangled together.

In Jin's portrayal, the revolutionary slogan of "freedom" in marriage choice and in liberation from the patriarchal family fails in the Mao's rural areas. The lives of Shuyu and Kong Lin are still controlled and decided by Confucian traditions and practices. Though the idea of "love" was advocated as a modern concept, the urban and rural split made it irrelevant to the

country folks and community, where economic codependence and ethical responsibility in the kinship system and community are held high. Shuyu and Kong fall into the victimhood of the age-old practice of an arranged marriage and then the Confucian ethics of communal care and filial piety.

Jin presents a premodern Chinese village space and a premodern Chinese woman. Many critics had pointed out the false representation of Shuyu with her bound feet in the time of 1960s, when in fact the practice had been abolished at the turn of the twentieth century. The practice had been abolished as part of efforts to liberate women from the cruel patriarchal practice and to liberate women from family. From the early years of the revolution, China's Communist Party actively recruited women, promising to liberate them from the bonds of family and tradition. Communist revolutionaries in the 1920s and 1930s also tied the emancipation of women to the transformations of society.

Historian Gail Hershatter writes in *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past*, "The Chinese Party-state moved rapidly and forcefully to rearrange rural social relations and the categories through which they were understood. One of these categories were

gender" (4). The Communists defeated the Nationalists in 1949, and just one year after the founding of the People's Republic of China, the new Communist government passed the Marriage Law of 1950. In the early socialist transition period (1949-1966), particularly when the New Marriage Law took effect in the 1950s, the Communists abolished the feudal practices of concubinage, polygamy, and arranged marriage, liberating women from centuries of oppressive conditions derived from Confucian ethics. In Dai Jinhua's point of view, "[i]n the Maoist era, socialist narratives in novels, dramas, radio, and film portrayed the liberation of female subjects from the economic exploitation of 'feudalism' and 'family patriarchy' by the Communist Party" (qtd. in Mayfair Yang 44).

We see in Jin's description a rural China, a space occupied by Shuyu, Lin's wife, and a cultural Chineseness embodied by her. We find in Jin's presentation many layers of Confucianism and Confucian ethics in his idyllic description of the space and the essential "goodness" that Shuyu embodies as a traditional woman. In Jin's depiction of the timelessness nature of Mao's countryside, Shuyu, particularly her bound feet, become this embodiment of timelessness. Much resembling the idyllic rural scene described above, she remains the

placeholder of tradition, family, and community. Shuyu's inability to move ahead with time may also imply the failure of the Maoism's gender policy in liberating women, particularly in the rural areas.

Ha Jin has been criticized for being ignorant of historical fact and using Shuyu's bound feet as a ploy to eroticize Chineseness to give in to the Western reading public's insatiable desire for exotic victimhood of women. However, in reality, Jin offers a critique of the wrongheadedness of Maoism in that the total eradication and destruction of traditions ignored the ethical relationship and ethical responsibility represented by Confucianism in the rural area. In the book *Xiangtu Zhongguo (Rural China 乡土中国 1948)*, sociologist Fei Xiaotong's research on the rural area in China in the 1940s concluded, as explained by R. David Arkus that "village communities were little changed from generations earlier, limited to a life governed by voluntary adherence to custom rather than by state-enforced law. The old rural patterns, rooted in the soil, worked. Indeed, they had left their stamp on all of the Chinese cultures, such as social relations based on particularistic ties rather than Western-style group membership" (453). However, Fei

also mentioned in his research that “a social erosion” in the twentieth century had left the countryside defenseless (453).

Jin's depiction of an idyllic countryside also reflects nostalgia for a pre-Mao China. As in Sheng Congwen's depiction of China's profound agricultural civilization, the good part of the Confucian ethics requires that everyone take care of each other, and this becomes embedded in the co-responsibility system of a clan, a kinship, a big family. What the educated intellectual elites tried to destroy since the late nineteenth century are some if not the Confucian tradition, particularly the gentry (*Shishen* 士绅) system that use to hold the rural community together are shattered. The ethical relationship and responsibility system are replaced with the political unit like communal leadership, the class-divided peasantry, led by empty political slogan and corruption. The destruction of rural space in Mao's time was devastating.

In the Post-Mao era in the 1980s, the works of Mo Yan (1955-) and Su Tong (1963-), represent a retro literary movement, named "root-seeking" literature. The literature is known for creating non-Maoist countryside as if no communist revolution had ever occurred. In order to unravel what happened during Mao's time, one way of exploration is to look back in history and

in places that are untainted by Maoist state politics, such as the minority and less inhabited regions and places; hopefully, they can provide some solace, strength, or recovery from the historical violence inflicted by Maoism and the Maoist state. One of the criticisms of Maoism is the destruction of ethical relationships in the rural area and the loss of Chinese tradition and the deep-rooted identity tied to agrarian tradition and history.

2.1.2. The City and Maoist Ideological Apparatuses

If we say the Confucian tradition that Shuyu conforms to made it hard for Lin to divorce her, the army hospital in Muji City, part and parcel of the Communist state apparatuses, sets up the rules and laws that further hinder him from marrying Manna. Since Lin works in a military hospital and lives in the military compound, every detail of his life could be strictly monitored and regulated. The army represents an overarching, hegemonizing institution with a strong ideological leaning. It plays a crucial role in the formation of social order. The degree of surveillance and control is ubiquitous and becomes a form of intrusion into private life. We are also stunned to realize the omnipresence of surveillance, ideological control, and political conformity in the novel. Communist disciplinary laws and rules, self-criticism in political studies

session, censorship, and model building, comprise the instruments by which the state exercises its control over individuals. All those measures pervade individuals' lives in public and private, and into the body and soul.

Two military hospital rules—one that prohibits the divorce of Lin and the other that inhibits any sexual contact between Lin and Manna—illustrate the state's control over individuals' lives.

One rule dictates that an officer could end his marriage without his wife's consent only after eighteen years' separation. "According to the army hospital's rule, established by Commissar Wang in the winter of 1958, it was only after eighteen years' separation that an officer could end his marriage without his wife's consent. The commissar had died of hepatitis the next summer, but for twenty-five years the rule had been strictly observed in the hospital"

(15). Later, Lin will speak of the eighteen-year rule, which prevents Lin from divorcing Shuyu:

Year after year, he and Manna hoped that the requirement of eighteen years' separation before he could end his marriage would be revised or revoked, but the rule remained intact.As time slipped by, people grew oblivious to the origin of

the rule, as though it was a sacred decree whose authenticity no one would dare question. Year after year, more gray hair appeared on Lin and Manna's heads: their bodies grew thicker and their limbs heavier; more little wrinkles marked their faces. (198)

The narrator conveys a sense of the years passing. His comment on the rule being perceived as a "sacred decree," provides us with a sarcastic sense of how something that is a random afterthought of an incident has become overtime a universal given fact.

In addition to the eighteen-year rule for divorce, one of the other visible metaphors for the Communist disciplinary rules is the wall, by which the military hospital compounds fences itself away from the outside. The rule is against unmarried couples walking together outside the compound, which everyone in the hospital must abide by:

This rule had been in force for nineteen years since 1964 when a nurse got pregnant by her boyfriend, who was an assistant doctor. After the pregnancy was discovered, the couple confessed they had met several times in the birch woods east of the hospital. Both were expelled from the army—the man became a village

doctor in his hometown in Jilin Province while the woman was sent to Yingkou City, where she packed seafood in a cannery. Then the Party Committee of the hospital made this rule: two comrades of different sex, unless married or engaged, must not be together outside the compound (116).

The rule is manifested by the concrete physical existence of the wall. The wall of the hospital sets up the visible sign of a "forbidden" area beyond and divides up space into "inside" and "outside," "legal" and "illegal," "conformity" and "punishment." Ha Jin uses the wall as a mark of prohibition and indictment. It regulates people's behavior consciously and unconsciously. In Part 1, Chapter 6, the narrator informs us that, despite the gossip about Lin and Manna that is beginning to circulate, "the hospital leaders (...) found no evidence that Lin and Manna had broken any rule. Never had they been together outside the compound; nor had their conduct revealed any intimacy" (58). A little later, just before the scene in Part 1, Chapter 10, in which a drunken Manna urges Lin to make love to her, Lin reflects upon his attraction to her—and interestingly enough, he conceives of his desire in terms of physical space. "He looked around, fearful of being seen, as the thought came to him that they had broken the rule that had

prohibited such a meeting outside the wall" (83-84). Even when Lin is outside of it, smoking and sitting on a boulder, the first thing that comes to his mind when Manna appears is that they might be seen and reprimanded for breaking the rule.

In these two cases, in the military hospital compound, we witness the randomness of the eighteen-year rule and the clear, closed-in space of dos and do not's. The Maoist state naturalized the rules, which became internalized on the individual level and the public discourse infiltrated the private space and made unclear the boundary between the external rules and conformity in the internal consciousness. Toward the end of the novel, it is clear that the rules are internalized, and behaviors conform to discipline. In Part 3, Chapter 2, having married Manna and found his marriage to her disappointing, Lin walks one day close to the same wall where he and Manna had met so many years before. He spots a couple walking freely together after the liberalization of the 1980s and reflects, "Somehow to him and Manna, there still seemed to be a wall around them. They had never walked together outside the hospital since they were married" (297). The historical context that the narrator offers helps us see how ideology becomes internalized and how a rule or a set of assumptions becomes naturalized.

The rule is also invented to control and regulate sexuality. The rule is set because of sexual transgressions of employees at the military compound, and the couple was punished by demobilization on the man's side and demotion on the woman's' side. Assigning them worse jobs was a powerful indication of how the state controlled transgressive sexual encounters. In Mao's era, a romantic relationship between two individuals had to receive approval from authorities before it could become legitimate. The case of Manna's ex-boyfriend illustrates the sexual repression and political repression of the time, as he decides to leave Manna and marry his cousin because that is the only way to demobilize and move back to Shanghai. Lin and Manna are made to promise that the relationship between them stays platonic and never develops into a sexual relationship. In the courtroom, the judge presses Lin to admit that he has a "mistress" in the city. Lin denies that he has a mistress, insisting that his relationship to Manna is "pure comradeship" (121-122). He and Manna are in a platonic relationship because they have been cautioned against any illicit sexual relationship until he divorces Shuyu. He and Manna cannot be a family or a couple for eighteen years.

The urban military compound seems to have sexual and gender mores of its own. The discipline of women's bodies is even more severe. Nurses have to pass a virginity test to serve in the military hospital. This part of the novel reflects how the Maoist bureaucracy appropriates the phallogocentric and misogynistic Confucian tradition that safeguards women's virginity. As Evans argues in her book *Women and Sexuality in China*, “Chastity—women’s sexual self-denial...identified as the standard measuring sexual behavior and morality in general. Whatever its expression, female sexuality had to be controlled to prevent domestic and social chaos...The practices of moral control and intervention that the Communist Party inherited from its Confucian past were associated with an economic and ideological system that it was committed to destroying” (22). We see this most clearly in the conflicting demands on women as in Manna’s case. She was constrained by the rule at the hospital of no sexual contact with Lin, but then Geng Yang raped her. After the rape, when others blame her, she internalizes their accusation of being the initiator of the sexual encounter with her rapist, and she also sees herself as damaged goods. While constantly blames herself for becoming Yang’s prey, she worries more that she is being devalued in the eyes of men. “[I]f people know of the rape, I’ll become cheaper

in everyone's eyes, and I'll belong to a different category, lower than a widow" (194). Before the rape, she constantly fears of becoming an old maid, as some in her hospital are. The community's voice of blame and gossip further put her in the voiceless position of a victim.

Manna experiences the phrase "self-delivery" and "poked by a man" in a visceral manner: "The curses often made Manna feel as though she had lost a limb or a vital organ and become handicapped" (196).

Manna's China is a Maoist state, controlled by the Maoist ethical code, which prescribes what a woman should be and should perform in a sexually puritanical way; in this sense, the Maoist state inherited the Confucian code. Her ideas of "virginity," of being an "old maid," and her anxiety to marry to have kids all indicate that the Maoist viewed women as career workers as well as a natural mother. The puritanical sexual codes and morals stay the same as the Confucian ethics. Women are supposed to be sexually pure, and supposed to marry as the only way to fulfill woman's life, and procreation is a significant part of marriage. Manna is educated, she has a job and can financially support herself, but she needs a man to fulfill the myth of a woman's place in the world; any deviance away from the marriage is a violation of a natural order. In the book

Revolution and Its Narrative, Xiang Cai talks about the narration of sexuality in Mao's years:

“[T]here was a constant moralistic intervention. Or to put it more accurately, such narration was constantly trying to balance sex/sexuality with morality” (184). “Women are often shown as licentious seducers. Such representations and moral judgments inherent in them are undoubtedly male-centric. In contemporary literature, the Chinese revolution underwent a process of constant purification that, to a certain extent, was realized via the purification of women” (185).

Manna's loss of her parents at an early age sets her in the care of the state. She can probably be named “the daughter of the Party.” The Party-State literarily raised her. The Party-State replaces her family and becomes her parents. In the novel, the most telling substitute power of Party-State as parents can be seen when the compound leader tries to set up a date for her with the Vic Commissar Wei who is looking for a wife; the party chief thought of Manna as a good candidate. The fact that both Manna and Shuyu are treated as transactional objects on the marriage market is alarmingly ironic. Shuyu's parents arrange for her to marry Kong Lin. Manna, after failing to see her marrying Kong got desperate over the years for marriage. Both the military hospital and Kong himself arranged dates for Manna. The patriarchy system may change

in name, but in fact, the party-state replaces the old patriarchy and continues to exert power over women's choices and lives.

In "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Louis Althusser proposes the concept of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), in contrast to the Repressive State Apparatus, which refers to a series of institutions that function invisibly, "by ideology." He asserts that individuals are *always already* subjects of ideologies, and that ideologies interpellate concrete individuals as concrete subjects (172-173). As a result, "the vast majority of (good) subjects work all right 'all by themselves,' i.e., by ideology" (181). As Althusser points out, institutions such as the school, the army, and the family play important roles in the "reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology" (132).

The dominant discourse of Mao's era highlighted revolutionary ideology and suppressed individual feelings, and biological needs are best examined in the tug of war of love and marriage in Lin's divorce battle. Revolutionary politics found their way into the private domain of emotions by way of the narrative of love stories, thus powerfully stimulating the interaction between the public and the private. In China, various levels of Party committees also perform the

tasks of ideological education. In the following section, I'll talk about Maoist language and various mechanisms in the Ideological State Apparatuses, including thought control measures such as self-criticism and model building.

Ha Jin is known for his bilingualism that borders on translation, translating Chinese into English directly. Therefore, in the novel, there are apparent expressions that are particular to China's context. More importantly, in his translingual practice, he retains authentic "Chinese" language flavor; in this case, Maoist language or *Maoyuti* is strongly presented in the text.

Waiting describes a world in which terms like "comrade," "revolutionary officer," "model," "open-minded gentry," "socialist peasant of the new type," and "red and expert" all carry specific political meanings. Manna's friend was introduced with a description of her family's class label: "Haiyan was pretty and pert...but her family was classified as Open-Minded Gentry"

(64). Lin is not mere "Lin," or even "Lin Kong," he is "Comrade Lin Kong." The judge even hails him in this way: "Comrade Lin Kong, you are a revolutionary officer and should be a model for us civilians" (12). Lin is identified here as a "revolutionary officer." He is also emphatically told that he is a "model for us citizens." That is to say, it is the identity that he has

been assigned by Communist ideology that he should abide by, and this identity carries with it certain obligations, responsibilities, duties, etc. The private self, as such, does not exist. He only exists in the public functioning of these names. Lin is going to the court involves him in a ritual, which confines him within the ideological system of Chinese Communism.

Certain exchanges between characters are colored by the political rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution, which was a particular feature of Chinese discourse at that time (Cheng qtd in Hang Zhang 209). In advising Lin on divorce matters, Geng Yang says that Lin “must carry it out by hook or by crook” and then he quotes Mao to emphasize his political authority, “[m]aterialist dialectics hold that external causes are merely the condition of change whereas internal causes are the basis of change” (167). Immediately after Yang nudges Lin to sleep with Manna with another quotation from Mao, “Chairman Mao also said, ‘if you want to know the taste of a pear, you must change the pear by eating it yourself’” (167). In both cases, he uses a commonly accepted and irrefutably politically correct slogan to make his point. Maoist discourse can be seen both as a product of the highly politicized social life and a major manifestation of it,

demonstrating explicitly the influence of ideology on language use and the manipulation of language that often occurred in China at this time.

By retaining the authentic language use of the time, Jin tries not only to capture the exact historical time but also to evoke the feelings of the time. Most importantly, the use of *Maoyuti*, prevailing at the time, is indicative of the infiltrating power and the success of ideological discipline, and the linguistic persuasion of the Maoist state. Often regarded as central to Mao's success in revolution, the revolution of Chinese modern language has taken the trajectory of first modernizing it from classical Chinese language to vernacular language, and then in Mao's time, during his canonic text "Yan'an Talks," Mao details the use of people's language as the common language¹². In the time leading up to the Cultural Revolution and at the height of the Cultural Revolution, the recitation of Mao's quotations—popularized by Lin Biao, the Vice-Chairman of the Communist party, second only to Mao in power, in the collection of the little Red Book—was first enforced in the army and then popularized among the general public.

¹² For full article on Mao's *Talk at Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art* (1942), see https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_08.htm

Self-criticism in political studies was another way to have one's state of mind controlled.

“At political studies Lin often felt that people expected to hear from him about his inmost thoughts, as though he were supposed to make a self-criticism” (61). Political studies in Mao's era were an occasion when everyone developed the habit of criticizing him-or herself, confessing character weakness and improper thoughts. It was also part of this routine to report private thoughts to party organizations by writing diaries of self-examination and self-condemnation. Colleen Lye argues that “Political and moral censorship...where ‘consent’ is ‘manufactured’ by the state, what gets seen, heard, or read therefore bears a direct relationship to what the state apparatus decides is ideologically appropriate” (265). In regularly and routinely doing so, the party ideologies will be indoctrinated.

Another important means for thought control in Mao's China is through censorship and restricting access to books that were deemed potentially dangerous and subversive to the regimes as a possible source of heresy. In Part 1, Chapter 2, the narrator tells us that the hospital has a small library, but its holdings were limited to the subjects of politics and medical science. Lin's personal collection of books includes revolutionary romantic novels such as *Song of Youth*,

Cement, The History of International Communism, War and Peace, The Guerrilla Detachment on the Railroad, White Nights, and Lenin, which are popular among his colleagues. Even those titles are restricted. He can only circulate them underground. When the hospital library is ransacked, and its two-dozen novels and plays have been surrendered to the bonfires built by the Red Guards before the city hall (33).

Apart from disciplinary rules, self-criticism, and censorship, the Communist party also attempted to create the revolutionary models that individuals were exhorted to emulate. As class struggle dominated the political discourse, the model came from the proletariat class, which consisted of workers, peasants, and soldiers. It also indoctrinated people into correct political thinking by organizing frequent talks and lectures by the party. During the heyday of the Cultural Revolution, Lin writes and delivers lectures reflecting on Mao's three pieces of writing: "Serve the People," "In Memory of Norman Bethune" and "The Foolish Old Man Who Removes the Mountains." All of these writings are aimed at exhorting certain lofty Communist ideas. "Serve the People" is a slogan for mass mobilization. Norman Bethune is a Canadian doctor who selflessly served in the Chinese army and died on duty. The last piece is an old Chinese idiom

praising human perseverance. The Chinese Communist Party's ideal hero is often a masculine icon featured by an undefeatable body, being asexual, selfless, loyal, and wholeheartedly devoted to socialist revolution. It was his "model" status that made Lin additionally visible as a representative of the ideal ideological image of the party. Lin's model status is terminated when his relationship with Manna began.

Ha Jin also plays with political clichés and slogans as irony and parody. It is easy to see the official discourse that pervades *Waiting* is both real and fake. For example, the word “model.” Model” in China is a term of official approbation and is used to describe practically anything—cities, factories, schools, workers, and peasants. When the judge criticizes Lin in the Prologue, he says that Lin should be a “model for us civilians” (12). However, when Haiyan uses the term, it is to express her irritation at Lin for refusing Manna’s offer to go to bed with her: “Hmmm, I didn’t know Lin Kong was such a loyal friend. A good man indeed. No wonder somebody called him a ‘model monk’” (69). The word is used the last time in the novel's penultimate chapter. Lin is thinking about how his long sought-after marriage to Manna has turned sour: “[He] began cursing himself. Fool, eighteen years you waited without knowing for what! Eighteen years, the

prime of your life, gone, wasted, and they led you to this damn marriage. You're a model fool!"

(295)

What is obvious in *Waiting* is that the State, the party, the rules, the names, are part of an ideological system, which many people do not actually believe in. The words and language are malleable and change along with context. Jin tries to point out that *Maoyuti* bears little relation to the hypocritical, corrupted, and highly unjust society people live in. Through these dire contrasts, Ha Jin reveals the deeper complications and often contradictory practices that render the ridiculous side of China under Mao's rule. The characters of *Waiting* must negotiate their way between the insanity of this kind of discourse and the harsh circumstances of their lives, and try to find love somewhere along the way.

2.1.3. Castrated Male—"A Superfluous Man"

In a sense, Chinese men in Mao's years were physically, mentally, and intellectually castrated. "Castration" (*yange*) becomes a common metaphor of the time when the state has strong control over peoples' thoughts and actions, and it is always present in private and public life. The state exercises consistent discipline over the words and actions of individuals and

employs thought reform and self-criticism to make sure individuals align with Communist ideology. "Several urban men I spoke with used the term *castration* (*yange*) to describe the situation of men in Maoist society.....The party kept constant watch over them, dampening their personal ambition and preventing them from standing up and saying what was on their minds. This is why today's men lack "initiative" (*zhudongxing* 主动性), "boldness" (*daliang* 胆量), "vision" (*yanjie* 眼界), and "creativity" (*chuangzaoxin* 创造性)" (Mayfair Yang 51). Chinese feminist cultural critic Dai Jinhua also comments that the castration complex is a metaphor for political persecution (*Rewriting Chinese Women* 193).

Chinese people who lived during this politically charged period were stripped of access to books and to alternative thinking, which is monopolized by the party. Secondly, they have limited choice concerning where to work, in mobility, and even in the most private event, of whom to marry; they have been stripped away of their ability to make decisions, immobilized by their work unit, constricted by their choice. Thoughts have to be reformed through criticism sessions, and foreign and deviant ideas will be purged, stripping away the power of thinking. Even the personal appearance will be monitored and disciplined to ensure conformity in dress

codes and hairstyles. To a great extent, these means and measures adopted by the Communist State defined one's existence in Chinese society where the boundary between the personal and the political is so thin and where state power continually infringed on individuals' private domains.

Lin represents the castration of manhood by the state, and those around him often question his manhood. The lack of masculine traits defined many men in Mao's time as effeminate, with a lack of power to assert themselves. In such an extremely restrictive environment, man is easily castrated, his masculinity doubted. In this encapsulated family saga, the limbo state of not being able to divorce and not being able to marry becomes deeply embedded in the cultural space and physical space as argued previously. The question of Lin's masculinity is also brought up several times by different characters including Lin himself, and signs such as his Adam's apple, the appearance of his penis, and his having fathered a child are offered as evidence pointing to his degree of manliness. As the protagonist, Lin is almost an asexual man and has no desire to love. He is emotionally unavailable and waiting is only a natural order to him. He never loves a woman, never takes the initiative, and never writes a love

letter. Everything in his life is arranged: an arranged education after sacrificing his brother's education, a marriage arranged by his parents, a job assigned by the government. His relationship with Manna develops only when Manna takes the initiative, holding his hand in a theater.

Another aspect of social control that castrated Lin is in the portrayal of Lin as a bookworm. He has a private collection of books, which hardly escape the fate of being burned during the Cultural Revolution. The collection is also a mix of genres, with much Russian literature, books that are rare at the time. Lin's scholar-look and bookworm nature resemble the traditional Chinese male literati, complicit in service to the Imperial court, unable to utter a dissenting voice and unable to stand alone; he is a literary man but ineffectual and effeminate. Lin seems to carry the premodern literati male norm, whose status and masculinity is defined by their learning and their erudition in Confucian classics. All the lectures he delivers, including “Serving the People” “Learn from Norman Bethune” and “Old Man and the Mountain,” advocate for selflessness in serving the country, in contributing to the collective goods, and in sacrificing personal interests.

In Lin's interpretation of Whitman's poetry *Leaves of Grass*, which was assigned to Manna for essay reflection after the date with Commissar Wei, Lin writes, "the grass... was a very progressive symbol, charged with the proletarian spirit" (154). He self-censored any interpretation on "the subject of sexuality and self-celebration" (153). The literary criticism and interpretation have to stand in line with politics. In Leo Lee's critique of China's literati tradition, he writes about the political impotence of the literati's economic dependence on the state and their general ideological conformity with the political leadership. The critique asserted that intellectuals were unable to achieve genuine independence, which hindered their ability to influence the leadership and policy making (514).

Fearing punishment and political persecution, Lin refuses twice when Manna asks to have sex with Lin, and Lin refuses twice, both times. Lin's has sexual doubts and questions his manhood, sexual potency, and sexual inhibition. For example, he declines Manna's suggestion to spend a night outside the compound to consummate the relationship, insisting on keeping an eighteen-year platonic relationship with Manna. Later Lin has an internal dialogue with himself. One of his inner voices taunts him by asking him whether he has any sexual desire for Manna.

Lin's other voice replies: "I love her and am attached to her, but that has nothing to do with sex.

Our love is not based on the flesh We love each other. That's enough" (71). However, two

pages later, in a passage written in indirect discourse, we read: "unlike other men who were

crazy about women, he had never fallen in love with a woman" (73).

Lin is also set up as a contrasting example with Geng Yang, a virile man, whom Lin and

Manna befriend and who later rapes Manna. In Manna's early observation of Yang, "in many

ways, he was more like a man to her, strong straight-forward, fearless, and even coarse" while

"Lin was too much of a gentleman, good-tempered and studious, with little manly passion."

(176). Yang questions Lin's masculinity, virility, and sexual potency in the rape scene. He

slanders Lin in front of Manna, calling Lin a "sissy" "no good" and who "doesn't know how to

handle a woman" "I saw his dick when we bathed together in the bathhouse I've wondered ever

since if he's bisexual" (179). Her rape can be read as a slap in the face of Kong Lin's impotent

state of being. Lin's fears of being sexually involved with Manna and his inability to legally

marry her have given Yang an opportunity to take advantage of the situation. In the 1980s, the

rapist Yang also benefits the most from the opening up and reform and quickly rose to the new

state-sanctioned "model citizen" by following the political call that "To Get Rich is Glorious" (283). Yang turns out to be among the first to get rich by scheming and being ruthless. Yang quickly replaces Lin's model status during Mao's time, the new representative, who can make money and become part of the nouveaux riches, who "were held up as examples for the masses to follow" (283).

Lin's inability to give Manna what she wants also makes Manna available to dominant males, in particular, Vice-Commissar Wei. In Part 2, Chapter 5, Vice-Commissar Wei of the Provincial Military Command asks the hospital to recommend a suitable wife to him. The hospital decided on Manna. The place Manna first meets Commissar Wei is at an army hotel: "The army hotel was at the west end of Glory Street, an area that used to be a red-light district. It occupied a black brick building that fifty years ago had been a Japanese brothel whose owner wouldn't take Russian rubles, which were in circulation together with Chinese yuan at the time" (141). The ridiculousness of the whole system finds its best expression in the writer's depiction of the history of the buildings and other constructions that belong to and are used by the Party. The solemn places now inhabited by party members are associated with sex and shameful past.

The juxtaposition seems to reveal the affinity of the brothel with the army, of the prostitutes with the women soldiers coming into the military army. As the prostitutes served their clients, the girls coming to the military hotel are ready to serve the army officers like Commissar Wei.

The control of sex and the puritanical ideas of sexual practice and demands put on Manna and Lin are offset by the gossip of unrestrained sexual practices, mainly by the Communist leaders in influential positions. The Party leaders are all men, who exert powerful control over this community and enforce the Communist rule. The general of a field army, Commander Pengfan Hong, was a sexual beast. He "changed wives every three or four years because he was too savage in bed for a regular woman to last longer than that. Every one of his wives would fall ill within a year of the wedding and soon die of kidney disease. Again and again, the Party arranged a new wife for him, but after the deaths of several women, he was finally persuaded to marry a large Russian woman, the only one who remained unbroken after living with him for seven years" (151). As seen in this example and many others, those Party members in power are not subjected to the sexual puritanism. Therefore, the sexual and love puritanism as part of Mao's discourse was hypocritical.

The abusive of power and sexual appetites of the dominant party leaders and military ranking officers further marginalize males such as Lin Kong, emasculating their masculinity. The revolutionaries and party leaders are driven by sexual desires and lust and are involved in sex scandals and rumors, which contradict the political gender discourse featuring the suppression of sex. Abusing their power, they were free to divorce and marry again, indulging themselves in love affairs. The male castration on the one hand represented by Lin and the sexual promiscuity and orgy-like sexual appetites on the other illustrate contradictions as well as the corrupt nature of the leaders. Ha Jin shows his disdain for the hypocrisy of Communism. He deconstructs the ideal male image the Party propagandized, mocking the political system, and debunking its hypocrisy.

The castration of an ordinary male can also represent in general the castrated China, which stays in a closed-door state with a closed mentality and becomes ideologically driven and paranoid. China has been continuously in a war mentality and prepared to get ready to fight in wars with Korea, Russia, and Viet Nam. The chaotic nature of the country's mental state is reflected on the civilian level in the strict prohibitions and excessive power and abuses. The

Cultural Revolution is occasionally mentioned, with its illogical sequence of events, such as the gossip of "time bombs" set around Mao when Deng Xiaoping and Liu Shaoqi were targeted as "capitalist-roaders," and early stages of the fictional fights between Red Guards (55). There's also mention of burning books. These national events and trends are mentioned in passing, and they do not seem to affect Lin and Manna's life. However, the paranoid nature, the randomness, the irregularity, and the irrational behaviors are a mental state of a China that has been disconnected from the world. This again reflects the closed-in mentality, represented in this disconnected world, by the wall, visible and invisible. The border has closed in its citizens. The paranoid nature of the country and the leadership and the contradictory logic behind it became evident during the Cold War when China was disconnected from the international community. In scholar Xiaojiang Li's reflection of the ideological war during before the 1970s in China, after China had fallen out with Russia in the 1960s, "[a]s a result, both sets of discourses imported from the West (Russian communism and Western liberal thought) have been cut off from their origins due to the periods of hostilities with the outside world. An important consequence of the ensuing stress on 'self-reliance' was the ascendancy of the slogan 'Long Live Mao Zedong

Thought!' Thus we were drowned in a vast ocean of Maoist discourse, into which we plunged our entire youth" (271).

Manna's incurable illness and impending death is, of course, the shadow that hangs over the whole ending. Lin tells Hua and Shuyu about her illness, full of despair. The thought came to him that Shuyu and Hua could live quite well without him. This realization saddened him and made him feel like a good-for-nothing. "I'm a superfluous man" (303). It is a phrase he had read in a Russian novel. According to Russia scholar David Patterson, the prototype of a "superfluous man" is a man in exile; "[E]xile is not only a social problem or a form of punishment for political crimes. Beyond these categories, it is an expression of that Russian condition that most of all announce the homelessness of the modern human condition in its existential and metaphysical aspects" (ix). In Patterson's understanding, "in the case of the superfluous man the discourse that interacts with life proclaims an exile from life. It is a discourse of exile from discourse, a word expressive of the loss of the word...thus void of any other sense of meaning or relation in life" (5). Lin self-identifies as a "superfluous man" at the end of the novel when he speaks about his troubled sense of self, which stems from his unconscious cooperation with the State which he

ultimately succumbs to without consciously resisting, struggling, or fighting, with no individual autonomy of self and subjectivity.

Lin is a tragic figure: his powerlessness, impotence, fear, and helplessness as a male subject make him an anti-hero type. Lin's self-control, his obedience to the Party order, and his attempt to live up to the social expectations directed toward a revolutionary soldier such as himself, ultimately develop into a kind of indecisiveness in dealing with the mutual attachment between himself and Manna; all this speaks to the symptom of the "superfluous man" with which he self-identifies at the end of the novel. On closer examination, Lin's tragic personality—passivity, self-restraint, obedience, etc.—are the result of Mao's rule. He represents an individual whose individual desires were smothered and displaced by the will of authority. Behind Lin's image as a victim is the author's ideological critique against Maoism.

The aspiration of Communism and Mao's socialism in constructing a "new socialistic person" fails as Lin, born and raised in the socialist state, fails in finding the meaning of life, and instead becomes a middle-aged, "superfluous," marginal man. The middle-aged Lin suffers from his own disillusionment with life, which is a life that is fraught with political existence. The

individual can hardly carve out a private space for living and breathing. His movement also projects the trajectory of mobilization theory by the communist state following overarching dictatorship of class struggle. The youth from the rural areas as the agency of the history and master of the nation are to be motivated to seek education and transformation into "the new socialist people" in Xiang Cai's literary review of the socialist transformation period (1949-1966). In the late 1970s, the Mao's regime ends, and it closes its brutal chapter of the ideological battlefield.

The nation-state building project envisioned by the intellectual elite in the late nineteenth century, carried forward by the May 4th generation youth and then onward by Maoism in the twentieth century, embodied the hope and aspiration of building a nation representing the new "personhood." The split between rural and urban is symbolized in the novel in different spaces determined by different cultural legacy. However, as China establishes itself as a Communist, socialist country under Mao's leadership, the futuristic utopia vision fades away after a series of political campaigns. The new masters of the nation, the generation born "under the red flag," suffers the most among various campaigns, losing grounds after each ideological battle, and

never fully realize the potential of the individual, definitely not in the Western literal sense that was envisioned half a century ago.

2.1.4. The Symbolic Meaning of Waiting

Jin tries to convey in *Waiting*, both as a title and as a major theme in the novel, a multi-layers of symbolic meaning. It looks like Jin is using this story as an allegory to illuminate ordinary people's helplessness and haplessness at the mercy of the society, being swayed this way or that way during Mao's time. In the last scene, Hua tells Lin: "My mom is very happy at home. She said she'd wait for you" (308). Lin then tells her: "I'm a useless man, not worth waiting for." Hua then tells him, "Don't be so hard on yourself, Dad. We'll always wait for you" (308). The meaning of "Waiting" has changed, and the subject and object of waiting are switched. Lin waited eighteen years to divorce Shuyu and marries Manna, only to find Manna dying at the end of the journey. Shuyu now claims the authority of waiting to be reunited with Lin, becoming a family again. The reversal of the relationship and the return to the origin sparks philosophical thinking on the meaning of waiting.

Within the love triangle between Lin, Shuyu, and Manna, one waits for another, for the fulfillment of life's greatest bliss, marital bliss. Despite Lin's attraction to Manna, he is unable to promise to marry her, putting Manna in a perpetual cycle of waiting. Shuyu, a loyal and loving wife in a traditional Confucian sense, protected by layers of Confucius moralist and by Maoist moralist and legal codes, is not to be easily divorced. By the very end of the novel, the impending death of Manna of heart disease again prompts Shuyu to say to Lin that she will wait for him, for his return to his original family. The cycle of perpetual waiting has existential meaning, for fear of the emptiness of life in the very end, the meaning of life in retrospect, in one's last reflection. The cyclic nature of life is repeated in these loops of repetition and return.

The "emptiness" and numbness that Lin feels and the failure of socialism run parallel with the failure of an individual's quest—or inability to embark on a quest—for a happy life. The protagonist Lin, whose is not the Communist hero in the Communist literature but an anti-hero, a "superfluous man" of in-between space. It adds to the sense of loss of time, and thereafter loss of a youthful time in the cycle of eighteen years, which can be a generation and which is also what it takes to biologically change the cell in one's body, to renew of oneself. The failure of Maoism in

the case of Kong Lin best exemplifies the individual identity in crisis, and that the struggle between the renewed sense of “Chineseness” in Maoism is a failed experiment, just like Maoism under Mao’s rule is a devastating failure on many levels.

On the surface, Jin seems to choose eighteen years to show an unreasonable, random rule for the automatic dissolution of a nominal marriage. In fact, we can read layers of meaning in the specific number eighteen. Eighteen years can indicate the maturity of a human from infant to adulthood. Therefore, symbolically, it can refer to the disillusionment of Lin in his life in Mao's system, an eighteen-year process of coming to the realization of what a waste of life it is. On this level, it can be read as a coming-of-age story of Lin, though Lin is a middle-aged man by the end of story. The realization and the disillusionment only come at the very end of his adulthood. Metaphorically, it points to the waste of the nation's historical time in the vacuum of non-being, when socialist practices, one after another, failed to realize their socialist revolutionary goal. The eighteen-years' waiting starts at 1966, pointing to the start of the Cultural Revolution, and end at 1984, the early time of reform and opening up, when the move away from ideological dictates of Maoist China start to give way to the post-socialist state of China.

Chineseness represented by these characters speaks to the national crisis of identity trying to assert Maoism and the Maoist vision of utopian future communism and his version of communism experiment, in the momentum of "revolution," perpetuating among its people antagonist feelings toward the enemy classes and toward Confucian tradition. Many words are empty terms. The ideological machine is pervasive and invincible at the same time while governing the most private decisions of love and marriage. The absurdity and randomness, yet the power and control over the individual life, over the individual body, and over the individual's sense of self, are superbly illustrated by this family saga.

The novel has various levels of returning that I find interesting. Instead of a linear progressive historical view held by Marxist-Socialist practitioners, Jin sets up the novel and the protagonists in different loops. Lin's annual returning to the countryside is an obvious returning route. The route of going back to his hometown, in the countryside, where he was born and raised, and the idyllic description of the place, as well as how he succumbs to various persuasions in the countryside, all speak about his inability to resist, depart from, and rebel against his past. On the one hand, he chooses to maintain the connection with his roots and origin.

He succumbs to his parents' wishes, which put him in the marriage predicament in the first place.

His filial piety seems to be ungrounded. As an educated youth, the May 4th tradition means

"walking out on family," revolting against family arrangements, assert his individuality, first and

foremost in personal choice of spouse and marriage based on a modern concept of romance and

love. His failure speaks about the failure of various movements in the height of Mao's socialist

experiments. His desire to return is also indicative of him being unable to fully assert himself as

an individual, fearful of the future, which is represented by Manna. Bound by his past, fearful of

the future, he is stuck in the vacuum.

On the national level, if we read Jin's novel as "national allegories" in Fredric Jameson's term, "All third-world texts are necessary...allegorical, ...they are to be read as what I will call

national allegories" (69). "Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and

invested with a properly libidinal dynamic-necessarily project a political dimension in the form

of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the*

embattled situation of the public third world culture and society" (69 emphasis original). Then,

the cyclical nature speaks to traditional a Chinese philosophical view of life and at the dynasties'

rise and fall. More recently, it reopens a conversation with the past, which in Jin's depiction, is still in a vital state of being in the rural areas. Allegorically, Shuyu is the idealized Confucian wife and represents the Confucianism that Mao desperately wanted to dismantle, eradicate, and destroy. The intactness of her character and the idyllic description of the rural space where she resides is set in contrast with Manna, whose parents died when she was young and, therefore, became an orphan girl in the care of the state. Manna, a new woman in Mao's China, earns economic independence by training as a nurse. Her being raped suggests the daughter of the state being violated by the power of the future, where we see in contemporary China the total disregard of Mao's time and doing away with his radical and utopian socialism. When the time shifts and history changes, Manna is dying, and Kong Lin is cofounded and confused, feeling lost and defeated.

Jin gives the protagonist the name Kong Lin with a double meaning. The name of Kong Lin is an ironic pun of Mao's political campaign named "fight against Confucian and fight against Lin Biao (*fankongfanlin*).\" In the height of the Cultural Revolution, this slogan and campaign continue to destroy China's tradition in the name of "destroy the old four." Lin Biao,

who instigated the idolatry of Mao in the military, requiring everyone to learn Mao's thoughts in the condensed version of Mao's quotes, now called Mao's "little red book." Lin Biao's attempt to escape by airplane in 1971, which then crashed in Mongolia, created a disillusionment in many young Red Guards as they felt disbelief that the man second to Mao can betray Mao, and thus discredit Lin Biao's previous efforts in upholding Mao as the "infallible" sun. In naming the protagonist Kong Lin, Ha Jin pivots the struggle between the traditional values and lifestyle and the Maoist Communist values and way of life. Neither gives a satisfactory answer. The perpetual state of waiting, recalling the significance of the name Kong Lin, indicates the vacuum state of being in the time of Mao, caught in between space and time, not being able to cast away the past, yet not able to move forward.

Mao's period, in Jin's depiction, is epitomized in the message that "waiting" tries to convey. It is an era of wasted time and energy, the endless time of waiting for the promised utopia communist future. The optimism fed by the propaganda machine, either in the time of the Great Leap Forward or the Cultural Revolution, proves to be a malleable one and quickly recedes into history. In foreseeing the future, the time 1984 definitely marks the end of Mao's radical

socialist experiment and opens the re-examination of its visible and hidden legacy in the lives of many. The book's ending in 1984 echoes *1984*, a dystopian world under the authoritarian state.

The question still lingers, what's after 1984?

As the novel drives to its narrative end, China quickly changes from heavily ideologically controlled Mao's era to Deng's Opening and Reform era. Characters like Geng Yang usher the new era in with their thirst for money, ruthlessness, violence, "by hook or by crook" (166). The replacement and substitution of Kong Lin, the model worker in the time of Mao, is quickly displaced by Yang, the new model worker in the time of Deng for economic reform and rampant economic development. The rapist turns into a millionaire, capitalizing on the newly opened market and opportunity. Time quickly changes, the old rule is abolished, and a young man and woman now can freely walk outside the compound, as the inhumane regulation and rigidity of Maoism loosen up. For the couple that waited eighteen years to be together, this time comes too late, and the price they paid for the Maoist era is endless waiting and wasted time and life.

In the 1980s, once the ideology of Maoism dissipates, the success story of Geng Yang, the rapist takes center stage. The greedy, ruthless people like Yang become the new

spokespersons for the new era. China's new dawn is on the horizon. It follows the new capitalistic logic. However, for Kong Lin, Manna, and Shuyu, they will most likely be displaced again in the new era. It is an era that money speaks louder than ideas. Represented by the character Geng Yang, a sexual predator, a smuggler, an opportunist lacking decency and morality, yet in Jin's description, full of sexual power, vitality, and ability becomes the new type of "personhood" the nation selects to be worth emulating and modeling. Obviously, with this twist in the story, seeing from the turn of the character's life, Jin foreshadows his disillusionment with Deng's reform era. The lack of morality, the lust, the greed, the manic drive for wealth, and the desire, condoned by the new political leadership, again speak about the fundamental conflicts between "Chineseness" and "modernity." The kind of "modernity" that China chooses will again become the defining force in reshaping the "Chineseness" associated with it. Jin foreshadows the internal conflicts between the socialist social structure and the capital practice. On the human subject level, Jin speaks like a prophet of the possible ills brought about by the greed, lust, and corruption on individual life.

In Ha Jin's essay "The Spokesman and the Tribe," he writes about his intellectual trajectory as a writer, who initially takes up the responsibility of a spokesperson for a tribe. In the preface to *Between Silences*, his first book of poems, he thus writes, "As a fortunate one I speak for those unfortunate people who suffered, endured or perished at the bottom of life and who created the history and at the same time were fooled or ruined by it" (*The Migrant as Writer* 3).

Jin talks about a book that changed his life, V.S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*, which demystifies the role of spokesperson for a tribe in capturing the true relationship between the individual and the collective. "The insignificance/of a person to a tribe/just as a hive keeps thriving/while a bee is lost" (27).

Jin's story, often read as a national allegory, points to the "unfinished revolution" or "failed socialism" experiments orchestrated by Mao that have left more questions than they resolved. In the novel, the penetrating and pervasive power of revolutionary politics and Confucian traditions of the past are apparently felt. It may seem once in a while, in the impasse of that eighteen years, nothing much happens, but we do know that a lot of historical events happened in those eighteen years, as the whole nation was in constant turmoil. But on the other

hand, while the country as a whole experienced much upheaval, the individual living in this time is constricted and reduced to the inactive state as a human being, which by and large also indicates an inactive state of the country; these individuals are not moving toward the Communist utopia Mao promised to lead them to. The general sense is of the loss of time, corresponding to the loss of vitality of the main characters in the story, as well as the loss of decades of the nation.

2.2 “The Snake Woman”: Questioning Sexuality and Gender Identity in Geling Yan’s *White Snake* (1999)

In May 2014, Chicago’s Goodman Theatre put on *White Snake*, adapted from an ancient Chinese tale, which tells a story to a Western audience of the universal message of “love.” In a review in the *Chicago Tribune*, Chris Jones wrote that when the story starts to touch “timeless” truths, that is when the show comes to life. I was in the audience for one night and was surprised to see many among the audience were moved to tears, and their eyes were still moist when the show ended. The audiences in the Goodman Theatre would not realize that about twenty years ago, a Chinese/American immigrant writer named Geling Yan, who lived her first few American years in Chicago, a city that she claims dearest to her heart, wrote a namesake story called *White Snake*, but the adaptation transformed the story almost beyond recognition of its origin.

White Snake was first published in *October* magazine in China in 1995 and won the award for *October* magazine’s novella competition in 2001. It was translated by Lawrence A. Walker, Yan’s husband, and published by Aunt Lute Books in 1999 in the United States. The story is set in the Cultural Revolution, with a time span from 1963 to 1980. The play retains the original flavor of the myth about love. The original story is a love story of a snake transformed

Lady White, who falls in love with a human named Xu Xian. In Yan's story, the performer Likun Sun, who is internationally renowned for her ballet dance performance of white snake, falls in love in real life, not with Xu Xian, the mortal, but another woman, Xu Qunshan, in the disguise of a man.

In the novella, Likun Sun is a nationally acclaimed performer and dancer in Sichuan province before the Cultural Revolution, and her signature dance is *The Legend of the White Snake*. She is denounced in 1966 when the Cultural Revolution starts as a “decadent bourgeois element, a suspected Soviet-trained spy, a seductress and a counter-revolutionary snake-in-the-grass” (3). She is detained and imprisoned in the scenery warehouse of the provincial Performing Arts Troupe in Chengdu roughly from 1966 till 1972. During the days of her incarceration, living next to a group of construction workers who are working nearby, she loses her dancer's elegance and self-esteem. To survive, she learns to speak the people's vulgar and sometimes profane language and to act like them. One day, a young man introduces himself as Xu Qunshan and claims he is an envoy from the national government in Beijing; he visits her every day for a month during the interrogation sessions. During their daily meetings, Sun falls in love with the

young, elegant officer who is about ten years younger than her. On the day of their last meeting,

Xu takes Sun out of her detention room for a ride in the town and then to a guesthouse. In the

guesthouse, Sun realizes that Xu is a woman. Soon afterward Sun has a psychotic break and

spends two years or so in various mental institutions. Xu continues to visit her in the hospital,

this time as Shan-shan, a young woman, and their ambiguous relationship continues its course.

After the Cultural Revolution, Sun is rehabilitated and returns to the stage for a performance.

Sun tells Xu that she is engaged, and Xu announces her impending marriage. The story ends with

Xu escorting Sun out of her new apartment from the evening wedding celebration, and they bid

farewell to each other.

As in *Waiting*, the Cultural Revolution provides a theatrical backdrop, where the characters are put on stage and asked to perform in a prescribed way. Critics and scholars use “political theater” to describe the particular period. Unlike in *Waiting*, where characters are more or less like passive puppets robbed of their agency and choice, Yan in her novella *White Snake* has subverted the regular presentation of this period by focusing on how individuals define their identity and personal relations within this history with full awareness and self-consciousness.

Her story is women-centered by focusing on the lives of women and the changes in their lives that are affected by the Cultural Revolution but not determined by it.

This chapter looks at Yan's text and analyzes how she questions and challenges the Maoist definition of gender politics and female sexuality in Mao's time. In the story of *White Snake*, Yan creates characters that challenge gender identity defined by Maoism and challenge heterosexual normality by granting a sexual ambiguity in character Xu. In her narrative strategy, Yan strategically adopts multiple narrative texts, which not only adds richness to the story but also points directly at the problematic nature of language and discourse underlined by the power dynamic between public and political discourse and private and individual discourse. The hidden subtext of the legend of the white snake, a Chinese folktale, serves as a thread to structure the story in Mao's time in a manner that recalls but significantly rewrites the tale. Through rewriting the folktale, Yan is consciously connecting the modern Maoist world with its pre-modern historical past. The re-interpretation of the myth opens space for an additional dimension between discourse (text) and power of interpretation, as well as the continuation of cultural memory.

2.2.1. White Snake: The Myth and Its Reinterpretation

Stories from myth, legend, and folklore constitute a big part of Chinese cultural tradition. Many stories such as *White Snake*, *Mulan*, and *Liang Shangbo and Zhu Yingtai* (translated as *Butterfly Lovers*) are passed down through generations by the strong presence of oral tradition in Chinese culture. The beauty and survival of these stories reside in the capacity for interpretation and re-interpretation. These stories serve as important narratives, set in the cultural past yet typically carrying moral lessons, wisdom, and teachings. Since China has been through a millennium of patriarchal tradition, many stories are male-centered. Therefore, many contemporary women writers find it necessary to debunk, revise, and rewrite these stories. Alicia Ostriker writes, “All myth central to a culture survives through a process of continual reinterpretation, satisfying the contradictory needs of individuals and society for images and narratives of both continuity and transformation” (27).

The white snake story has many different versions over the course of the history. According to Chia-ju Chang’s dissertation, “The Chinese Snake Woman: Mythology, Culture Female Expression, ” the prototype of the most popular snake stories among many different

versions, can be traced to *Baisheji* 白蛇记, a *chuanqi* 传奇 (strange tales of the supernatural), of the Tang Dynasty (618-907) (87-90).¹³ The basic plot and the commonly accepted story of the white snake stories are about snakes transforming into women to seduce and kill men. It expresses men's fear of women's sexuality and amplifies the old misconception of female sexuality and desire by underpinning women's monstrous inhumanness as a snake. These kinds of stories have been widespread and receive wide readership as the stories continuously are adopted into different genres, such as folktales, rhapsodies, short stories, plays, dramas, etc.

Many later white snake stories have been rewritten with a more sympathetic portrayal of the snake. One of the well-received versions of the story is the Lady White, the woman who changed into a human from the white snake, who treasures human love and marries a human named Xu Xian. Instead of devouring man, she is portrayed as a loving wife whose sacrifices saves and preserves the family. Then a Buddhist abbot named Fa Hai alerted Xu to the nature of his wife, and Fa Hai and Xu tricked her into her original form and scared Xu Xian to death. Lady

¹³ According to Chang's research, there are two identical versions of the snake woman tales from Tang *chuanqi* *Li Guang ji* and *Li Huang ji*. These two tales are regarded as the ur-text of later snake woman tales, including the White Snake (88).

White and Blue Snake figured out a way to resuscitate him. Fa Hai eventually conspired with Xu Xian to have White Snake imprisoned under Thunder Peak Pagoda at West Lake in Hangzhou.

In this popular story, the heterosexual relationship between Lady White (the immortal half-snake, half-god) and Xu Xian (the mortal human) is very much emphasized. The mortal heterosexual love is all that White Snake envies about the human world. The snakes initially don't have a gender. White Snake chooses to be a woman and then a wife and eventually a mother, as a full experience of being human and a woman.

This plot conforms to Confucian ethics and morality, particularly in the figure of Buddhist abbot Fa Hai. Fa Hai represents moralist safeguarding the sanctity of marriage between humans. As a Buddhist, he also practices abstinence, which is often seen as an image of sexual inhibition in the Confucian tradition. Blue Snake also chooses the female form to be a loyal companion of White Snake. The strong relationship between White Snake and Blue Snake is often taken as a symbol of strong female bonding and friendship.

In many accounts, the Lady White is the protagonist, and the Blue Snake, her snake-turned maid, is a minor character. There are contemporary revisions of the story, such as *Blue*

Snake (Qingshe青蛇1993) by Li Bihua, which is narrated by the Blue Snake. In the translated version of Yan's *White Snake*, to situate the story, Lawrence Walker gives a synopsis of the Peking Opera version of the story in his translator's prologue to the story.

The Legend of White Snake concerns two nagas, or mythical serpents, White Snake (a female) and Blue Snake (a male), who had attained the status of Immortals and lived in the heavens. Blue Snake fell in love with White Snake and asked her to marry him. White Snake made Blue Snake a wager: they would fight a battle, and if Blue Snake won, White Snake would become his consort, but if White Snake won, then Blue Snake would turn into a female and become White Snake's maidservant. Profoundly enamored of White Snake and desiring to be with her at all costs, Blue Snake accepted the challenge. White Snake won the battle, and Blue Snake became her handmaiden. (1)

So the story continues, which I'm going to summarize here briefly. They descended to earth, and Lady White met and fell in love with a young scholar Xu Xian. A Buddhist abbot named Fa Hai saw through her disguise and warned Xu Xian. When Xu gazed on her original form, he died of

fright. White Snake and the Blue Snake managed to resuscitate him, but the revived Xu remained fearful of his wife and fled to the abbot's monastery for refuge. There's a battle between Fa Hai and White Snake. Upon discovering White Snake is pregnant, Fa Hai advised Xu to return to her until the child was born. After the child was born, Fa Hai imprisoned the White Snake under Thunder Peak Pagoda at West Lake in Hangzhou. Eventually, Blue snake rescued White Snake. They departed the world of mortals and re-ascended into the heavens (2).

Metamorphosis, in Kafka's sense, is about alienation from the meaningless capitalist world, the otherness that's separated from the recognition of the self. Metamorphosis in White Snake, in Chinese century-old folklore, sublimates love between a human and snake-transformed human and usually signifies a desire to be the "other" to enjoy human love. In some versions, it is a celebration of love between lovers or between women (two snakes), and in others, it is about "otherness," the differences that will not be tolerated and has to be cast out, in such a moralistic point of view. Metamorphosis registers meanings of change and transformation, as well as self-alienation and identification.

The story is about the love story between two unlikely subjects, a snake-turned woman figure (showing male desire and fear at the same time). The marriage validates their love, and a union can put the fear under the control of the institution of marriage, through which sexuality can be expressed in private between husband and wife. It is also a story of transgression. The transgression of White Snake, who wants to be a human and experience a human's life, particularly a woman's life, comprising love, marriage, and childbirth. The storyline follows the traditional convention of a love story. The twist is the character Fa Hai, a priest who has the power to exile, imprison, expel, or punish White Snake because the boundary between humans and the animal world cannot be crossed. There is the transgression of border crossing: 1) a snake cannot turn into a woman; 2) a snake-woman cannot marry a man, and 3) a snake-woman cannot live life like a human. The biggest sin of all is the destruction of the sanctity of marriage, a union between humans.

The story itself is a discourse that privileges heterosexual marriage and creates a villain to defend the sanctity of the marriage as between humans; the transgressive acts of the snake-turned-human don't belong to the human world, no matter how hard she tries to play the perfect

wife and mother role, the helper wife who uses her magic to make Xu's medical practice and herb store business a success. Once she is revealed to be a snake, he was shocked to death. The woman's animal nature will come alive at any time to scare the husband. The animosity of White Snake indicates the general fear of women's sexuality, the sneaky nature of woman, the misogynistic view of the woman.

It is also a story about belonging and not belonging. As a good Confucian wife and helper, she was denied her place in the world, and her goodness, generosity, and love for her husband and the human world do not count, for she does not belong to the human world. Her animal nature separates her from the human world. On a deeper level of reading, the woman does not belong to a man's world, and the orthodox Confucian texts have always kept her in check and reduced men's fear of her sexuality. As a woman, she is literarily barred from entering the man's world—a gender transgression that is considered punishable. Women's destiny traditionally relies on the family and is confined to the inner quarters of the house. A feminist reading of the story reveals that the transgression of a woman is found in her pursuit of love, the tricks played to seduce the man into a relationship, and then in working alongside the man to help with his

herb business. The assertiveness of what she wants and achieves is set aside with the wooden character of the effeminate–scholar turned herbalist, who deserts his wife when faced with the truth of her nature; though conflicted, he is swayed by the moralistic teaching of Fa Hai and it doesn't take much persuasion for him to stand by the teaching. The women characters in the story, White Snake and Blue Snake, are both formidable women characters, who are lovable and likable and have been popularly received for centuries.

In Yan's *White Snake*, the heterosexual turned female bonding, with intense love interests, also show the representation of female-bonding as a form of homosexual and homoerotic expression; Yan tries to tease out a hidden story of the possibility of a relationship between White Snake and Blue Snake. When the focus changes, a different story is revealed, and another possibility is opened. Xu Qunshan and Sun Likun's love story are the focus of Yan's narrative. While the original storyline follows the structure of a love story between a woman and a man, the women's stories are hidden, erased, silenced. Yan tries to write that love has no boundary, and love between man and woman is not the only allowed form: woman and woman have always enjoyed bounding, sisterhood, possibly homoerotic moments, and sometimes homosexual desires.

White Snake, in the version of Xu and Sun in Maoist times, opens possibilities of re-interpretation not told in the original story.

In the story, Mao's Communism replaces the Confucian orthodoxy that controls people's behavior and private lives and that demands conformity in thoughts and artistic creation. Yan incorporates folkloric material into her story and sets it in the time of the Cultural Revolution. The story of Xu and Sun follows the structure of the meeting, falling in love, and ending in marriage. The villain Fa Hai is played up as the various Communist authorities in the novel, to uphold Communist ideology. The story questions heterosexual normality, as it questions the normality of the Cultural Revolution. Yan also brings out and embraces feminine sensuality and sexuality, which have been suppressed or erased during Mao's time. With an obvious subtext of the tale of the White Snake, this story is told in multilayered narrations to unravel a hidden love, beauty, and longing for personal connection and intimacy.

2.2.2. Sexuality and Gender Identity

2.2.2.1. Likun: Body and Woman

The Confucian reading and interpretation of the story have gone through many versions.

The central tenets stay the same: women's sexuality is to be feared if not controlled in marriage.

The denial of the autonomy of woman's sexuality continues in Mao's time. The state, though it

may not explicitly continue Confucian practices, interstates its gender politics and deploys a few

critical features of Confucianism. It monopolizes heterosexual marriage as the final destination

and goal for a woman. Women are nature mothers in a traditional marriage. Procreation in a

marriage is to fulfill women's reproductive function. In a traditional society, a woman's body also

lacks sexual expression and is therefore sexually inhibited. Mao's society continues to discipline

a woman's body, regarding what to wear or what a woman should look like.

In Mao's time, after liberation, women's discourse on their collective identity was

hijacked by the state, even as it eradicated the feudal practice of subjugating women under the

control of Confucian ethics. On the equality of women and men in Mao's time, Dai Jinhua, a

Chinese scholar and film critic, writes in "Gender and Narration":

In retrospect, it gradually becomes clear that the Maoist discourse "The times are

different, men and women are now the same" and its social practice while

establishing a social system and cultural tradition that countered sexual
 discrimination, also *instituted the denial of Woman as a distinct, collective*
gender.....Because of the elimination of sexual difference in the official
 ideological discourse, women, women's discourse, and women's self-expression
 and self-exploration became unnecessary and impossible....Once women were
 released from the female norms set by a male-dominated culture that required
 their subservience and silence, the masculine norms (not the norms created by
 men for women but the norms created by and for men) became the only absolute
 set of norms available to women. This is encapsulated in the Maoist saying,
 "Anything a male comrade can do, a female comrade can do as well." (103, my
 emphasis)

The public and political discourses on gender identity are that man and woman are the same, thus
 creating a "genderless society." What's unique to gender politics in Mao's China is that women's
 sexual and gender differences are erased. Mayfair Yang in her research into gender politics in
 Mao's time finds "the erasure of gender and sexuality" (*xingbie mousha* 性别抹杀) in public

space particularly during the Cultural Revolution (41). She adds that “in many social situations, gender became an unmarked and neutralized category, its role as a vessel of self-identity was greatly diminished, and it lost its significance for gender politics, which was replaced by class politics” (41).

Maoist China is a “genderless” society, a society that only has one gender, which is male. Dress code, hairstyle, and body image popularized in the public discursive and visual realms are coded as masculinized images and are often unisex. Mayfair Yang notes that the urban girls were “masculinized” (*nanxinghua*) (41). In Yan’s novella, it is said that the Red Guards who served on the Vigilance Committee on Likun “were all teenage girls, dance students at the Performing Arts Academy. In keeping with the revolutionary operas of the last few years, they all had broad shoulders, thick legs and loud voices” (7). Therefore, in a similar manner to Dai, Yang concludes that “[g]ender relations in China in this period were not so much transformed as gender itself declined as a salient category of discourse, and the desexualization of gender contributes to this decline” (44).

In Mao's time "gender, especially female gender, was culturally invisible" (41). Yan creates in *White Snake* a different story about Likun, a dancer's life that accentuates a woman's body. Pursuing ultimate artistic perfection, Sun Likun identifies deeply and closely with her dance "To study and imitate the behavior of snakes, Sun had apprenticed herself to an Indian snake charmer and had helped him raise snakes. The 'snake step,' which she developed on her own, became her signature movement, and its performance received tremendous acclaim among ballet critics" (3). She performs as a ballet dancer as *White Snake* on stage and in the film. Her professional fame and success were well established when she traveled to the Soviet Union's International Song and Dance Festival in 1958 and 1959 and won the Stalin Prize for the Arts.

Contrary to ordinary female experience, and the visual neutrality concerning hairstyle, dress code, Likun's performance and stage life as a "snake-woman" is a culturally visible symbol of a woman's body in a body-less and genderless society. The theater offers a limited space to see a woman's body that is denied to the public. The expressiveness of her "snake" dance on the stage embodies femaleness in the body, the movement, the neck, and the dress, even in her voice. While traditional literary texts like *White Snake* rarely have a visible presence of a woman's

body, the traditional Chinese Peking opera disallows women's performance. According to the prologue, Likun's White Snake story is based on Beijing Opera. It is well known that in Beijing Opera male performers impersonate female characters. The stage gives a limited discursive space for a cultural representation of femaleness, that is, a woman expresses herself in the dance moves.

Sexuality and sexual acts and behavior are chastised in Mao's China. Sun's marked difference, her "otherness" in the popular imagination as well as in official indictment is her expressive sexuality, either in her dance or her personal life. Sun is accused as a spy because of her alleged illicit sexual relationship with a foreigner, a Soviet Union dancer. From big-posters and struggle sessions, they identify Sun as a big slut who carries out an illicit sexual relationship with her Soviet dance partner. Their viewing of Sun's body further enhances the idea of a slut as an embodiment of her sexuality.

In the popular imagination, she embodies the spirit of "snake," a symbol of sexual allurement and attraction. Her presence and effect on men are apparent and keenly observed. It is pointed out by audiences that the expressiveness of her female body in the dance is sexuality in full display. Sun's legs are well-known and become a sex symbol. The construction workers who

work and live next to the warehouse would have sexual fantasies about “these legs abundant with strength yet flexible as white pythons coiling around their flesh, coiling around the downy nakedness of that pink-bodied Soviet dancer. Those two legs of hers could easily coil around ten of those furry foreigners” (12).

In the Maoist society, what is feared the most is this animalistic, feminine power and the possibility that men will fall into this trap of infatuation and sexual allurement. Reading the "mole" on the bottom of her eyelid, the older worker said, "It was a bad omen. It meant that this woman could never be without a man, that the space between her legs could never be idle" (13). The description of Sun and the understanding of her in public are frequently tied to their image of her snake-like body and her unrestrained sexuality.

In Maoist political discourse, any expression of sexuality calls for questioning. Her physicality, comportment, and movement attract men's attention. She drew the sexual attraction of men in all of the seventeen cities where she toured when she performed *The Legend of White Snake*, and it was rumored that the "water snake waist of hers got the men coiled up in her bed in no time" and "All the men who slept with Sun Likun said she had 120 vertebrae. She could twist

any way she felt like twisting. There wasn't a straight bone in her body. She could wind back and forth at will, so the effect was as if she had no bones at all " (6). The fantastic and over-sexed body image corresponds to their imagination of her unrestrained sexuality. The snake image in the popular account becomes a metaphor for unrestrained sexuality that needs to be feared, contained, and restrained.

Through official discourse and public humiliation and condemnation, her promiscuity was chastised severely, and her personal sex life was placed under public eyes. In the Cultural Revolution, Likun's stage performance quickly becomes troubled and politically targeted. The official verdict at the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 classifies Sun as "a decadent bourgeois element, a suspected Soviet-trained spy, a seductress and a counter-revolutionary snake-in-the-grass" based on her self-incriminating, four-hundred-plus-page self-criticism (3). The "decadent bourgeoisie element" is a common term in denouncing artists during the time, particularly in Sun's case who performs in a ballet, which is considered a non-Chinese, Western decadent art. Mayfair Yang writes, "In the dominant language of class at that time, to look

feminine was to look ‘bourgeois’ (*zichan jieji*), while a revolutionary image could only be coarse and manly” (41).

The charge of “a seductress” and “a counter-revolutionary snake-in-the-grass” emphasizes the monstrosity and debauchery of female sexuality, comparable to the ferocity and perversity of a monster snake. The term “seductress” makes a political accusation about her sexual appeal, seeing her dance as an embodiment of sin and therefore immoral. This charge again is indicative of a fear of women's sexuality, particularly of women who express their sexuality in public, even though the stage is a small public space. This accusation is also directed at the chastity of the female before marriage. Sun’s lifestyle and rumors of her premarital sexual relationships become “bourgeois elements,” and she a “counter-revolutionary.” “A suspected Soviet-trained spy” is an exaggerated and distorted accusation regarding her sexual relationship with the Russian dancer. She is perceived in the official discourse as belongs to a sub-class, a lesser human category—a fundamental “other.” The snake step, which used to be her signature dance step, a symbol of beauty, now become an embodiment of the monstrous conniving nature of the snake.

Moreover, among all those people attending Sun's struggle sessions, nine out of ten had seen her in *The Legend of White Snake* at least three times. Twice these people have been her audience, first as the audience of the play at a real theater, now an audience of the political struggle session, a political theater. Their desires and purpose are the same, and eight out of ten came for "the sole purpose of seeing her snakelike neck" (6). However, Sun has played different roles in different theater, one as the symbol of beauty representing ultimate artistic inspiration that calls for appreciation, another as a criminal accused of political wrongdoing. Yan smartly played the conflation of art theater and political theater.

Sun was denied the alternative discursive space. In two short years of incarceration, Sun has to disengage from her body and then disengage from the character White Snake. Her gender as a woman is predicated on the fact of her femininity disseminated by her dance moves and her snake-like comportment. Denied expression of her elegant femininity, she becomes like any desexualized middle-aged woman, "a keg-shaped waist, gourd-like breasts, and big squarish buttocks that spread out so wide you could lay out a whole meal on them" (7). Her vulgar behavior and decorum, even her vile language, resemble the male construction workers nearby.

The dignity she holds dear starts to fall away after years of solitary imprisonment, poverty, and mental torments in a ceaseless investigation and endless account of self-criticism. She resorts to the only living strategy that's available to her: to let go of her dignity, her modesty, her dreams and passions, and eventually herself. She finds new a pastime in exchanging words with the construction workers, and when the men smoked, she would beg cigarettes off them. She develops a smoking addiction and smokes "more ferociously than the men." "Soon no one could afford to supply her anymore, so she told them to pick up their cigarette butts off the ground and just give those to her to smoke" (10).

This is one of the downward metamorphosis spirals Sun Likun experiences. The degradation causes her identity crisis. She reflects on her life at one point in this way: "What was herself? Apart from her dancing, would she exist?" (17). She also reflects on her love life, as she used to be the love object of men. "Men loved her beauty, loved the seductive but spiteful look in her eyes, loved her dancer's breast, loved her long neck, sharp chin, and shoulders that sloped like flowing waters. Loved her picture with Zhou Enlai. They loved everything about her, except herself" (17).

In her transformation, Xu's presence insists on civility. The first time Sun looks up and sees Xu as a young man at the window, Sun "put down the cigarette she had just finished rolling" (14). Xu's appearance makes her aware of what she has become and makes her want to reconnect with her past, her dancer's past. Not long after Xu starts the interrogation, Sun starts to train and practice her steps secretly. Xu displays interests in her dance and asks about her dancer's life in the interrogation. The construction workers register her change as "the beautiful snake-woman inside her awakens from its hibernation and comes squirming forth to the surface. Her two eyes appeared as if recharged" (16).

Upon Xu's first visit to her detention room, pretending to be a special envoy from Beijing for investigation, Sun unconsciously makes "a completely unceremonious exit" from the stage, the scenery warehouse, where she is imprisoned (19). "She knew her appearance and comportment were unspeakably vile, like the sight of an unbearably ugly naked body" (20). Sun is an artist and a dancer, and she is always conscious of the space and her movement. She can forget about herself when she dances on the stage, playing a role that she would become. It is important for her to use the warehouse as the stage and use stage direction to "exit." All of these

are to create an imaginative space of "theater," transforming a warehouse into a theater and changing her back to the role of performer, who she once identified with. When Sun walks out of the corner again, she becomes the "White Snake" again "Under her skin, from somewhere deep inside her bones, her snakelike suppleness, and coiled splendor had revived—accompanied by a snake's cold radiance and proud aloofness" (20). Though nothing in the exterior changes, Sun has made a psychological metamorphosis and the warehouse becomes the stage set up for her transformation.

The love and attraction she feels towards Xun drives her. In particular she responds to how Xu appreciates her art and her innermost vulnerable self. As the relationship between Sun and Xu deepens, Sun transforms back to White Snake, the symbol of beauty. On the last day they are together, Xu takes Sun, and they spend the day in a guesthouse. Same-sex love is not treated as something to feel guilty about; on the contrary, Yan likens it to the purity of love and the acknowledgment of female sexual desire toward another female body. In the guesthouse, "They created in her a kind of longing she had never felt before, a longing for being together with another person, daily and always. She knew the humbleness of this longing as well as its

shattered prospects. All the pores in her body held this intuition" (45). This is the time Sun realizes that Xu is a woman. "The truth importuned her, confronted her, so close it could be touched. In her entire life, already half a lifespan, nothing had ever presented itself in its true state. The dance was her life, and the vividness of her dance lay in the absence of any other reality" (47). She suffers from a mental breakdown soon afterward. "The conventional love between the sexes Sun had once understood was now sapped of all meaning, had become emptiness itself" (54). The madness becomes at this moment a form of passion unleashing its long repression of her sexual desires.

Before departing to the guesthouse, Sun says to Xu "take me with you" (42). What she is asking is to be free, so she can be with Xu. Xu's female identity denies Sun false female fantasy of a male savior. She could not bear this loss of her love, and she cannot forgive the trick played by Xu Qunshan. She feels "the pining body of a thirty-four-year-old woman had been humiliated, toyed with, denied by Xu Qunshan" (48). When discovering Xu is a woman, her entire world crumbles again. The madness should be first recognized as predicted by the political persecution she suffers, by the world turning upside down. Then this time, the fundamental belief of

male/female attraction and relationship falls apart. “The conventional love between the sexes

Sun Likun had once understood was now sapped of all meaning. Had become emptiness itself”

(54).

It bears pointing out that the madness and psychotic breakdown have to do with the absurdity of the world she is experiencing, though her madness is a direct result of Xu being a woman. She has built her hope and expectation on a false assumption. It also indicates her years' incarceration that has taken a toll on her and broke her world very early on. She starts to lose touch with reality and is unable to comprehend what's happening. During the incarceration, the emotional and physical tortures she is under are exemplified in the 400 pages of self-incriminating criticism she wrote. Draft after draft, each time a little more detail emerges regarding who starts to unbutton the pants first, whether it is her or her Soviet dance partner. What is clear is how the state becomes invasive and intrusive into the private life and thoughts. The exhaustive interrogation, extortion for confession, and repetitive act of writing self-criticism precipitate her later madness.

Likun's madness puts her in a prolonged one-year limbo state. The hysteria of founding out Xu's real identity as a female is demonstrated in the repeated word use of "the sameness," "the nothingness." She says when she realizes Xu is a woman, "since there was no opposite sex here, what need was there to be naked? Being naked was meaningless, worthless, insipid redundancy, just as when she went to the public baths, and among the masses of same-sex bodies, bodies exposed with total nonchalance, her nakedness became nothingness" (53). The madness occurs when Xun realizes everything is the sameness, particularly the gender sameness, which means they cannot be a couple. Her hope builds on the heterosexual norm and expectation. When Xu turns out to be a woman, her whole belief system crashes.

It may not be a stretch to say that what "sameness" and "emptiness" mean for gender equality is that what Communist China promises to women turns out to be the "same" and to be "empty." Though liberated woman from the patriarchal family, the state did not grant women the power for self-definition. In Mayfair Yang's observation that in China:

[S]tate feminism brought women into public life as never before. However,

Chinese women achieved mainly an entry into the public domain of production,

not into the production of public discourse, which was reserved for the state. Thus, although state discourse granted women a central position, its very language also undermined women's self-identity and gender consciousness, which could serve as a basis for building a women's discourse and women's community" (46).

The state substitutes the family as the new patriarchal power. The same patriarchal structure controls the life of women and the gender identity of the woman as a collective. It speaks about the same sense of betrayal and desperation. On a symbolic level, Sun's madness corresponds to the madness of Mao's time; the madness is the belief in Mao's revolutionary ideology and willingness to live an individual life according to what the ideology dictates. Today you are the hero of the state, and tomorrow you become the state's enemy. The years training for dancing left her with nothingness when the things she does become counterrevolutionary art. The "emptiness" is also the "empty self" for years.

If at first the revelation of this female desire and homosexual identity could not be understood and appreciated by Sun, then after the development of madness, female sexual identity and desire will be more or less recognized and welcomed by her. A year later, Sun

wakes up, lucid, from her psychotic break. The awakening from madness signals the point at which recuperation takes place. Xu Qunshan, this time as a woman, comes to visit her in the hospital. Xu Quanshan changes from “Shan” which means “mountain” to “Shan” which means “coral.” Shan-shan, Sun Likun calls her, although she still loves the illusory man Xu Qunshan used to be. During this period, Sun begins to show signs of accepting Shan-shan and her homosexual identity: “When they'd walk around in the courtyard, they would always have their arms around each other's waists, or shoulders or else be walking hand in hand” (52). They renew their relationship. “Her tenderness and protectiveness were also purely those of a Shan-shan. Compared to Xu Qunshan, Shan-shan's lips were much softer, more delicate, warmer” (75).

After spending time with Shan-shan in the hospital, she starts to love Shan-shan. “if she didn't love Shan-shan, whom could she love? Shan-shan was the only ray of sunshine in her life, a ray full of dust, but also full of true warmth” (56). Through the bewilderment of Sun, Yan also transcribes a veiled sense of sympathy toward the burgeoning sense of sexual identity in Mao's society and towards the reawakening of female desire.

2.2.1.2. Xu Qunshan: Homosexuality and Gender Identity

For both women, there's hardly any parental presence. Sun left the family at the age of ten, and Xu's parents have been recruited by the state and work at a top-secret research institute at an unknown location in China's hinterland, Sichuan. After Xu left the village where she was a "sent-down youth," she spent time wandering around, exploring all the freedom and possibilities without parents' supervision. She also searched for a while for her parents, to no avail, until she finds Sun by accident at her incarcerated warehouse. The absence of parents, typical of the time, speaks about how Mao's politics separate family, and also, on a spiritual level, cutting off the youngsters' connection to the traditional past. Moreover, the story of *White Snake* serves as one of the few living memories of the historical and traditional past, still re-enacted on the stage and invoking among the audience the particular cultural memory.

The youngsters who grow up in Mao's time, virtually without parents when their parents were busily working for the state, were left roaming on the road, left to explore life on their own. They are also a group easily manipulated by Mao's politics and call for revolution. When Mao's revolutionary ideology controls the national politics and discourse, their understanding of themselves and the world is filtered through the impressionist young mind and inflammatory

politics. Red Guards are an excellent example, in that they would pledge loyalty to Mao, to the state, and during the high tide of the Cultural Revolution, they would disown their parents, revealing private conversations, potentially politically dangerous, or reporting to the authorities. They are also a generation of the young who grow up without guidance and have to figure out what is going on. Their coming of age is impregnated with frustration, conflicting ideas, and sometimes even violence.

In the novella, there's a short description of girl Red Guards and the "sent-down" youth. The Red Guards internalized the politics and acted cruelly toward other people. Use to worship Sun before the incarceration, now fired by a revolutionary spirit, and they discharge venomous resentments on Sun. When Sun goes to the outdoor toilet as the only time she is allowed to go out of her detention room, the guards "formed an X across the doorway" facing her that "she could squat for an hour with no results." She would beg the girls to avert their eyes" (9). However, the guards absolutely would not soften their hearts. Of the "sent-down" youth, Xu comments in her diary that the villagers helped those two girl students, "plotting the day when they would draw them into their huts and onto their *kangs*" and the foreman of the Production

Brigade often has a "meaningful look" in his eyes (34). There's a hint that the local villagers and Communist cadres sexually abused the girls.

Xu is different from the rest of the girls who come of age at the high tide of the Cultural Revolution, as she seems self-reflective, and her doubt of things starts from the challenges of her identity crisis, Xu's experience of Mao epitomized in her sexual awakening, her sexual exploration, and her time spent with Sun before and after Sun's mental breakdown.

The diary, as a form of women's self-writing, represents Xu's voice, as her confusion over her gender identity as it grows and changes. As a literary form, it gives an authentic voice to the speaker and reveals the subjective processes and subjective position of the woman. In modern Chinese literary history, autobiographical writing has always been one of the most important literary genres for women. It has been an early literary form in the modern Chinese literature that is used by women writers to express themselves, exposing their subjective world. It is an effective tool that has been taken up first by Ding Ling, a woman writer well known for her novella *Diary of Sophie* (1927) to illustrate the erotic and sexual awakening of a young urban girl in her various contacts with the male circle.

Yan unravels Xu's gender crisis at puberty in her diary. As a teenager, Xu "despised the superficiality of girls and scorned the vulgarity of boys" (36). She finds out early, during puberty, that she was attracted to women's body. Sun and her dance, which Xu saw five times, awaken Xu's sexual identity at the age of twelve. In the diary entry of 1963 May 11, she writes "she was so beautiful.....I'd like to touch her, to see if it is sculptured or real. I frightened myself when I have thought like that" (27).

Scholars observed that official discourse between the 1950s and 1970s was silent about homosexuality. "The Communist Party's effective monopoly over the printed word gave the moralistic condemnation of homosexuality prevalent in China since the early years of this century the 'sanctified station of common sense and convention'" (Hinsch 168). Therefore, homosexuality does not exist not even as a vocabulary. It is often described as a "sickness" or a kind of "abnormality." Evans finds that "official silence masked a widespread view of homosexuality as a violation of the natural heterosexual order, a sexual pervasion caused by sickness or psychological abnormality" (206). Both words "sickness" and "abnormality" have appeared in Xu's diary at age twelve when she doubts her sexuality as a kind of abnormality or

illness. She writes in the dairy, “I always do like dance, but since I saw her dancing, I feel I don't like dance so much as I like the body that produces the dance. So am I strange? Can anyone tell me if I'm normal?” (27). “I do hope that I'm normal, that I'm just like everyone else. Otherwise, I'll be so isolated! I'm so scared! “(29).

In the next diary entry on 1963 May 18, she writes that she went to see the show and met Sun Likun in person. This time seeing the show, she identifies with the character Blue Snake. Xu writes in her diary:

After becoming a female, Blue Snake is so loyal and brave, so attentive toward White Snake even in the smallest matters. What if he had not become a female? Wouldn't White Snake then have avoided having anything to do with that idiot Xu Xian? I really can't stand Xu Xian! If it hadn't been for him, White Snake would not have suffered such tribulations. If it hadn't been for that detestable Xu Xian, White Snake and Blue Snake certainly would have been very happy together. Oh, it really gets under my skin! (29)

In this account, it is unmistakable that Xu holds a strong resentment of the original storyline.

Previously, Xu has described in her diary her encounter with Sun outside the theater and admired

her beauty tremendously to the point that she wants to touch her body. Xu's interpretation of the play that I quote above displays an emotional response to the White Snake storyline. Xu's ambiguous gender identity also allows her to identify with the character of the Blue Snake. She shows sympathy for the Blue Snake. She thinks the Blue Snake is a better match/lover for White Snake. Xu Xian, the male romantic lead fails miserably in this race for love. However, she strongly identifies with the quality of the Blue Snake shows to his/her love object: loving, loyal and bravery.

Xu's ambiguity of her gender identity is seen in her tomboy style, dressing up like a boy, having a short hair, and in her identifying as a boy by wearing boy's wrist watch but at the same time keeping specific feminine features such as her delicate hands. The first time Xu realizes she has an androgynous body is at the age of nineteen. "I'm nineteen, and this is the first time I have felt that my body is inherently androgynous" (36). Her androgynous looks while working in the countryside as a "sent-down youth" afford her convenience and safety and respect. Looking like a boy with short hair, she can avoid male villager's "meaningful looks."

She later dresses up as a man in her brother's woolen army uniform and leaves the village on the pretense of being drafted into the army. Xu talks about her excitement at being regarded as a boy when she is called "Elder Brother" on the train. She soon realizes being a man "opened a strange and wondrous door for me. A door that led to unlimited possibilities" (36). She searched for an identity that transcended both sexes. Xu asks, "Will I be able to find my way through these possibilities? Is there a destiny that transcends the dichotomy of male and female? Despite having a body with a uterus and ovaries, is it possible that I'm not without a choice?" (36). She successfully escaped poverty and dire conditions in the countryside and started her wandering and vagrant life disguised as a man after she finds the convenience of this disguise.

After taking up a male persona and returning to Beijing, Xu explores her newly gained male identity to rebel against the establishment, listening to the underground music and reading literature she is into, contrary to the ideological revolutionary cause. She also joined an underground book group. The books include *Anna Katherina*, *Madame Bovary*, from nineteenth-century Russia or France. These were considered in the "official account" as "obscene, pornographic variety" (50). These novels feature women as protagonists who suffer from the

patriarchal system and are trapped in the institution of marriage. Madam Bovary's sexual awakening is aroused outside the marriage, and the continued path on the sexual liaison pushes her down the road of being destroyed. The same can be said about Anna Katherina's fate. The sexuality that is not within the institution of marriage in a patriarchal society ends up in a tragedy. In Xu's account, during these wondering days in Beijing, she has so much to do, "revolutionary travels, the production brigade. Sneaking back to Beijing, then stealing books everywhere, spiriting them out through the library windows. I was a bandit for a while. I completely forgot that I was a girl" (55).

Yan reminds us over and again that the Maoist state is a masculine state. Maoist times set a hierarchy between genders. Xu quickly realized that posing as a man she can not only avoid unwanted sexual attention, but she also can enjoy many male privileges, as well as the authority that being a male automatically conveys. This new male identity affords her with convenience, respect, and authority. Official discourses are all conducted in a male voice. The official discourses are passed around in letters and reports in all the institutional government function, and women's voice cannot be heard.

Xu's biggest stunt is pretending to be an envoy from Beijing and to visit Sun daily for a month in the warehouse where Sun has been incarcerated. Xu was looking for her parents in Sichuan when she accidentally runs into Sun and the warehouse where she is imprisoned. Here's how Yan introduces Xu: "Sometime in October of 1970, a very different person arrived on the scene" (13). His appearance, particularly because of his woolen uniform, this young man carries an air of superiority, and he was a 'cadre kid.' In addition to the authority that was given him by his woolen clothes and by his Beijing accent that bear certain authority, when he speaks "every syllable was enunciated clearly as if spoken by a radio announcer at the Central People's Broadcasting Station" (16), Xu's appearance is also captured by his elegance. He has "a peculiar air of casual elegance" (13) He is "civilized" compared with the chaotic world around him, the girl red guards who guard Sun's imprisonment reflected on their view of Xu that "he had inner qualities totally at odds with his apparently reasonable temperament, his completely anachronistic appearance and demeanor, and his civility" (24).

Later on, Xu reflects that "the mad desire" of her puberty had suddenly returned. Eventually, she realized that "this mad desire and all her recent actions had a mysterious

connection” (55). Xu’s obsession continuously brought her back to her love object. This can be seen in Xu’s repetitive, mesmerizing words of infatuation and obsession, which she repeats to Sun. Even the moment before Xu’s true identity as a woman is revealed, Xu murmurs the same phrase she has been telling Sun, “When I was little, I was such a fan of yours.” “When I was eleven or twelve years old” (48). Sun did not get it and was annoyed by the repetition, “Without this phrase, would this whole farce have any major theme? Without this phrase, would this entire unintended yet meticulous knit cocoon ever have been spun?” (49). The repetition of this line goes back to Xu’s initiation of finding her attraction to Sun, the very first time she realizes that she has a “gender trouble” that she considers abnormal. This obsession turns into a full-fledged love affair with Sun without Sun's full knowledge of her gender identity. The act of repetition feels compulsive, like someone who has to go to the exact moment when the trauma starts, to the time and location when everything starts to happen. This line also serves to illustrate that on various occasions that Xu is trying to reveal her true identity, a confession that escapes Sun's attention.

Xu appeared in the mental institution in Shanghai after two years and then visited Sun until her release from the hospital. That is where Sun and Xu's homoerotic relationship continues

and develops. Only this time Xu is called "shanshan" as "coral," and Sun is addressed as "elder sister Sun," resembling the sisterhood relationship between White Snake and Blue Snake. This address also partially makes up the missing familiar connection during the time Xu grows up. Additionally, the address conforms to the customary way of women who are close to each other in a sisterly bonding relationship. The moment Sun begins to accept and love Shanshan as a woman is a moment in which a true friendship begins.

People in the mental hospital start to gossip about the relationship between the two, because of the way Shan-shan looks at Likun is not usual, but of "man to woman." "Once when Bed 160 was taking her afternoon nap, that girl called Shan-shan arrived and soundlessly sat next to her bed. She kept staring at her, like she had some kind of problem, showing no shame" (52). After the rumor and suspicion of the hospital inmates and staff questioning the true nature of the relationship between Xu and Sun, they forcefully stripped Xu and found that she is truly a woman and therefore lost interests in her. They think "[n]o matter how intimate they were, no matter how much they would go burrow into those woods, nobody cared. What was so interesting about a couple of women" (52-53). The mental institution violent stripping case is

another case to indicate that women are first victims and then become victimizers. We still remember the Red Guards in the performing troupe who treated Sun brutally when she is in incarceration. When Women give consent to the male power, it perpetuates the power structure that privileges male discourse and, in this case specifically, privileges heterosexual normality endorsed by the State.

As the above incident also indicates that homosexuality does not exist in official Mao's discourse, not even in people's imagination. While gay homosexuality in Maoist times was regarded as threatening to morals and the procreation purpose of marriage, lesbianism was considered as no-threat and non-existing. Dai Wei writes that "there is not so much antipathy to lesbianism because it constitutes less of an open threat to public morals, and is, therefore, less offensive" (qtd in Evans 208). There are general assumptions and discourse regarding homosexuality as pathologically sick, morally degenerate, abnormal.

Yan emphasizes the positive side of Shan-shan, confirming her sexual identity and her will to pursue her love of courting Sun. When referring to the White Snake play, there's the magic of theater make-believe, Xu notes in her diary that "Blue Snake is defeated, as soon as the

stage lights go dark, when the light up again, he has already become a female" (29). There seems to be a space in the theater that allows for magic gender crossing, a kind of natural make-believe.

Unlike in the theater, gender switching and nonconforming androgyny are not as easy in real life.

In a society that regulates its people's concept of "normal" marriage and supervises its people's "unhealthy/abnormal" sexual lives, homosexual activities could only flow like undercurrents.

Soon after the Cultural Revolution ends, Sun starts performing and gets back on stage.

She starts her new life with a new husband, and Xu marries a teacher and tries to settle into a normal heterosexual relationship. It is plausible that Sun would get married as soon as she finds the right man. What is surprising is that Shan-shan even tries to get married before Sun does.

At Xu's wedding gathering, Sun comes with a gift. It is an intricate jade carving she had given them depicted "the drama of White Snake and Blue Snake" (60). This is an incomplete translation of the original Chinese version. The original line is that the jade carving depicts "both Blue Snake and White Snake curse and blames Xu Xian for betraying White Snake's love."¹⁴

The delicate carved female figures of White Snake and Blue Snake are approaching Xu Xian, for

¹⁴ Yan Geling 严歌苓. *Baishhe* 白蛇 [White Snake] Xi'an: Shanxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2008.

he distrusts his wife and believes the other people's story to see her as a monster serpent. Even though Blue Snake is in love with White Snake, nevertheless, he has to transform into a female and become White Snake's maidservant, to change his sex and cover his sexual identity to help the woman he loves to pursue the love of another man. The carved jade gift of the white snake story reveals the ambiguous relationship of the two female snakes and exposes the sufferings that Blue Snake has to endure while his/her sexual identity and desire are to be forever repressed.

At the wedding Sun also finds Shanshan “was clumsily learning how to act like a woman”

(60):

At his [Shan-shans' husband] side, Shan-shan would be able to gather herself together and curb all her abnormal originality. Sun Likun imagined that Shan-shan's deep appreciation for and reckless pursuit of beauty, as well as her natural empathy, could all over time be balanced and reined in by this man who was as punctilious as a textbook. Shan-shan herself understood that she had a fatal need for correction. (60-61)

Through Sun, Yan ridicules traditional mores. Homosexual desire forsakes its existence while relegated into a normalized marriage. The result of their relationship could only be ended like this in a time when Sun could never be a lesbian. It brings forth the possible repression that marriage might bring to Shanshan's sexual identity. If the banning of the ballet *White Snake*, along with the imprisonment of Sun, represents the censorship and supervision that stems from Maoist discourse, then the “correction” or repression of the homosexual love between Sun and Shan-shan, reveals another layer of fear and worry that exceeds the narrow belief and mandate of heterosexual normality.

When it finally is time to say good-bye, Shan-shan accompanies Sun to the bus station. The small walk on the deserted country street brings back a memory for the two. Shan-shan, standing near the bus stop at the deserted street “hands in pockets, her shoulders hunched up like a street kid,” reassures Sun that Shanshan does not deny her sexual identity (61). Shan-shan could always be what she wants to be, for Sun’s last glance at her reveals the potentiality for both women. Shan-shan’s sexual identity will never be completely suppressed, and Sun will never forget completely her initiation in this queer journey to love. Looking appreciatively at the

standing figure of Shan-shan, Sun climbs up the bus as if once again she sees Xu Qunshan's shadow in the girl. After everything, she could not resist but cried out in her heart: "Xu Qunshan!" (62).

It is significant that, at the end of the narrative, Yan makes the point that sexual identity is not fixed and women find ways to express their sexual identity in a society where social conventions and regulations repudiate women's sexual desires and condemn their overt expression. The gender transgression in Mao's time for one is to be feminine, to be a seductive female who express sexual appeal in presenting a feminine body, such as in the case of Sun. Alternatively, to explore cross-dressing gender switching, as in the case of Xu, who holds homosexual desires for a woman. Both cases in Maoist times are transgressive acts. The love story is a subversive act that can only exist in their private thoughts or in their diary entries but can never be revealed in public.

Yan uses the two women's love story to illustrate the genderless society. On the one hand, the state controls women's expression of sexuality and femininity, and a woman is coached to be like a man, erasing gender differences. On the other hand, as the state gender codes dictate,

doesn't allow space for the existence of homosexual experiments and homosexuality. Female sexuality has to serve the purpose of the family, the state that sanctions the family; any non-procreation sex is not considered. The ending is the reconciliation between the women and the state, and the return to family, no matter how coerced, seems to be the only possible solution out of the conundrum. Harris Evans argues in her book *Women and Sexuality in China*:

The portrayal of marriage as a naturalized state logically marginalizes sexual identities and choices that do not conform to it. The absolute authority enjoyed by the model of monogamous marriage denied legitimacy to all sexual practices that challenge it. All sexualities-male and female, heterosexual and homosexual-that depart from the sexual, reproductive and social practices inscribed in the dominant model are thus logically forced into categories of abnormality or deviance, ranging from the improper or odd to the perverse. (202)

Both women marry at the end of the story. Sun observes Xu's wedding and sees Xu learning how to be a woman as her new husband patiently teaches her. There's no diary entry anymore, but the

ending indicates the space for the two women to carve out alternative sexual experiences is minimal and must remain hidden from the public eye, public discourse, and public history.

The state apparatus sees the woman as part of a labor force, and the upholder of moral and sexual responsibility, a vehicle for human reproduction, so procreation within the confines of marriage is necessary. Everyone marries, and hardly anyone deviates from the norm. The ending, featuring the marriage scene, speaks of the difficulty of the proclamation and definition of the clear idea of homosexuality and lesbianism. The homoerotic desire cannot find words in Sun and Xu's vocabulary. Xu Qunshan's choice of marriage at the very end points to the continuing problems of ignorance and denial of lesbianism; there's no legitimate way for lesbians to exist in social and cultural space, even in the dawn of the post-Mao era. It is not certain whether the heterosexual ending voices Yan's disillusionment with the social-political reality of the Communist regime or whether lesbianism is merely a transitory process of healing for women in an overly politicalized culture. The institutional power in the form of marriage still exists, the time and Mao's history can be quickly swept underneath the history and past, the text between the women is still hidden, and this further disempowers them and erases their personal history

through marriage. The lingering effect of the State stays regardless of the death of Mao and reversal of Maoist politics. Similarly, the Communist Party stays and is in power, and the Maoist discourse can be steered away, but the state surveillance and the state power over individuals still stay.

Yan's lesbian spin on the tale of the White Snake renders a form of attack on Communist homophobia. In Chia-Ju Chang's dissertation, *The Chinese Snake Woman*, she argues that "The use of lesbianism can be deemed as a metaphor for a female redemption of trust and love that is sabotaged. The establishment of a true, sisterly friendship is an attempt at recuperation, which is destroyed by the patriarchal matrimonial system, and the communist idea of comradeship" (188).

The failure of Mao's socialism in genuinely liberating women; in giving them self-defined, identified autonomy of gender identity; in constraining sexual practices with the continued practice of denial of expression of femininity; in the exclusion of sexuality in the discourse; in controlling or even violating women's bodies through such means as medical, education, or national policies to manage woman—in these ways, the state replaces the family; continues to

define woman as genderless and sexless; allows no expression of female sexuality; erases their sexual differences; and denies homosexuality in women's experience.

2.2.3. Multilayer Narrative Strategy

In the story, Yan adopts a multilayer narrative strategy. Three paralleling narratives of the same story appear in the "official account," "popular account," and "the untold story" with different variations. The "official account" often appears in the form of official documents, letters to and among various government organs, and a newspaper report. Regarding the mystery of Sun and her relationship with Xu and the cause of her mental breakdown, there have been official investigations. The communal voice, via an omniscient narrator, details people's perceptions, suspicions, imaginings, and rumors around Sun and Xu in "popular account." Various rumors circulate among the people around Sun in the places where she is kept in prison and where she is kept as a patient. The "untold story" gets us into a reading of the diary of Xu and inside the consciousness of Sun, revealing what happens between Xu and Sun. The three different accounts intersect and often give three drastically different versions of the story. Strategically, these different voices, tones, and languages present multiple views of the events

and showcase the complexities of the historical time and lives of the two main characters. They arrive at a kind of narrative intricacy that exemplifies the multiplicity of truth and reality.

On official discourse, Li Xiaojiang writes:

Discourse has an important role....Especially in China, where the notion that the superstructure can react back on the economic base was particularly emphasized due to political demands, discourse becomes subordinate to ideology and becomes a monotonous gauge of political consciousness. Thus, the original cultural connotation and semantics in discourse are denuded; discourse becomes a standard by which people's actions are molded, and it ceases to be a language reflecting people's inner experiences (263).

The official account comes in official documents that are full of the political and hyperbolic language of the time. The story starts in the form of the letter responding to the request from the Premier Zhou Enlai' office, tended by the Premier's secretary, to reopen the case in 1972. Under the pressure of direct intervention from the Premier's office, the revolutionary committee that is in charge of the case writes a report to the office. Regarding the relationship between Xu and Sun,

in the official account part 2, a memorandum from Sichuan Province Performing Arts Troupe Revolutionary Leadership Committee to the responsible comrades of the Propaganda, Culture, and Education Department of Sichuan Province, their investigation reveals that Xu and Sun had “an illicit man-woman relationship.” The teenage girls who guard Sun “pooled all their recollections of the affair, freely filling in many asides and details” in the following popular account (25). To back up this conclusion, the committee members point out that they ordered a gynecological examination of Sun while she is still mentally unstable. The results of the examination were that “Sun's hymen is fully eliminated, but at this time it could not be ascertained conclusively whether Sun had sexual relations with Xu” (23). Outrageous as it sounds, Sun has already been convicted of having a sexual relationship with a Soviet dancer, and the medical exam will inevitably produce no evidence of any kind of a relationship with Xu. They still force Sun to the examination, which is more an act of humiliation via a direct bodily violation.

Moreover, in the official account, the Beijing Public Security Bureau investigates Sun's mental breakdown and the mysterious involvement of Xu Qunshan from Beijing. In the letter to

the Premier, they conclude that Xu Qunshan, who is involved in all kinds of petty activities in underground music and underground circulation of books, is not the one they are looking for, because “this particular Xu Qunshan is female” (50). Both the institution and the community seem to believe that nothing exists between Xu and Sun because of the prior assumption and the official effacement of female homosexuality. Therefore, Xu does not exist. The total official denial and recognition of anything homoerotic among females are exemplified in the last sentence of the report.

The “official account” often appears in the form of impersonal official documents in the masculine authority voice, which is used either to give orders and issue official verdicts or open and close investigations. It also comes in a hierarchical administration order from the top, from the Premier's office down to the performance troupe where Sun works. The ridiculous aspect of the account is that the accusation and the investigation's conclusion, in the end, both prove to be wrong. The committee members conclude in the report that Xu Qunshan cannot be a woman because they assume that Sun and Xu have had an illicit man-woman relationship. Their false charges and false conclusion both undermine the position of authority they are taking.

In the time of the Cultural Revolution, when the language itself becomes highly politicized and contaminated by political ideology, the tripping effects can be felt among the populous. The “popular account” refers to the popular perception, reaction, and interpretation regarding Sun and her dance, Sun and her incarceration, Sun and her relationship with Xu. In the "popular account part 1", Sun is seen as "a major international slut" (6). One of the people who helped her write a letter to her Soviet paramour later betrays Sun and copies the letter onto big character posters and posts them next to the sidewalk of a busy street. In a time like this, the public often gets their information from these big-character posters; these politically charged accusations and attacks, most of the time lack distinction between facts and fabrication and failed to discriminate what is real from rumors.

The "popular account" is infused with heresy, rumors, and imaginings, mostly incited by the big poster and struggle session. The public discourse among the community that Sun belongs to carries a resoundingly consenting voice, along with the same lines as the official voice in official accounts. It is said in Sichuan that the province has three famous products: pickled mustard roots, five-grain spirits, and Sun Likun (6). After the downfall of Sun, her name is

immediately erased, and the expression becomes pickled mustard roots, five-grain spirits, and Happy Mountain green tea (21). Sun's name is erased, and she is cast away like these easily interchanged, replaceable, and disposable objects. There are also rumors: "She lived together with a snake, that is what they wrote on the big-character posters" (9). This indicates that people's imagination can run wild and truth in public discourse is malleable depending on the popular political currents of the time, as Sun can be replaced with green tea and then later restored to be a "former famous performer" after the Cultural Revolution. Both accounts, "official" and "popular," testify to unreliability and untruthfulness.

The "untold story" gives the account of what happened to Sun and the relationship between Sun and Xu. All seven "untold stories" delve deeply into Sun and Xu's psychology and emotions by using the omnipresent narrator to account for Sun's consciousness and diaries mainly to reveal Xu's conflicting and cofounded emotions of her sexuality and gender identity. Xu's voice appears in diary entries of her feelings towards Sun at the age of twelve and then again of her cross-dressing as a man escaping from the countryside where she was a "sent-down" youth. The textual maneuver adds a contemporary touch, and spell out the forbidden desire such

as homosexual or homoerotic desire in the dairy, which is non-existing in the official document.

The textual differences and discrepancies in telling the story sometimes can be far apart from what happened to the two persons at the center of these accounts.

In the time of the Cultural Revolution, the official account and the popular heresy would never get close to glimpsing of the truth or even understanding the motive and human reality of the story. The multitude of people who lived through the era buried in their minds and hearts their real thoughts, which they locked deep inside themselves. Their experiences—life experiences externally and psychological experiences internally—have been swallowed, hidden by the grand historical narrative and by the distorted rumors and heresies of people around them. In the "untold story," "untold" indicates self-censorship, indicating this is a story that will never be told and will only be kept between Sun and Xu. It is also a gesture of defiance that this is the story, as many individual stories were often buried and untold, particularly in an extreme political time like the Cultural Revolution. The story is often hushed, buried, remaining unknown. Choosing to write a story, and making it available, is an act of defiance on the part of the writer. Yan seems to use the subversive "untold story" to counter the "official account" and "popular

account," both of which prove to be false. On the other hand, Yan also uses this narrative strategy to subvert the masculine "official account," using women's writing and self-expression to claim back their history and truth in the "untold story."

What Yan does two decades later is to depict a restricted love story between two women, even though the narration between the two women is entitled "the untold story"; once Yan tells it, it is a "told story." Once a woman's story doesn't have a place in history, once women were collectively genderless, without a body, without means to express their femininity and sexuality, and once a homoerotic desire didn't exist in official discourse; or if it did, it was categorized as "abnormality" and "sickness." Through the act of writing on Yan's part, we understand there is no abnormality of the love between woman and woman, as there is no abnormality of the love between the human and the snake. The story ends here, the insanity of Mao's time in history ends, but indeed love existed between the two women as they lived through and experienced it, and recorded by Yan's writing, the story of their love is reclaimed.

In "Gender and Narration," a Chinese Marxist feminist Dai Jinhua argues to retrieve the "authentic woman' who has receded from a non-hegemonic, matriarchal, oral prehistory into the

mirrored city of masculine civilization and language." Dai considers women to be "the natural successors of a lost tradition; women's writing about women is the way to stitch the fragmented pieces of women's body and words/history back together to reclaim the once powerful feminine symbol" (23). Yan's efforts to reinterpret the White Snake myth and rewrites the story from a women's perspective; instead of heterosexual love and sanctity of the institution of marriage, it focuses on the love and bonding between the two women. Through reclaiming the hidden relationship in the original text, Yan also reclaims "a lost tradition," a premodern her-story that had remained hidden, erased by hegemonic "masculine civilization and language." Through reclaiming the story, the history, and also the self-writing, I would say that Yan's *White Snake* achieve all as the "powerful feminine symbol" of reclaiming women's body from Maoist gender politics of erasure of gender difference and reclaiming words by giving a multilayered discourse regarding the same event. Also, the hidden, unspoken truth is that the same homophobia that existed in premodern China continues in modern China in Maoist society. Yan gives the old myth a lesbian spin and shifts the whole romance from a heterosexual to a homosexual one. That is subversive to the original texts. It provides a strong feminist bend of the story.

3.2.4. Conclusion

It is noteworthy that Yan's writings in the 1990s till early 2000 are based on her own experiences and memories of Maoist China. The work *White Snake* came out in 1995, six years after Yan moved to the United States in 1989. These initial years of temporal distance make her more mature while reflecting on China's socialist past. Contrary to the usual practice of Scar Literature in China or the sensational Red China memoir popular in the United States in the 1990s, her works of this period show deep thoughts and reflection by keeping a critical distance toward Maoist Chineseness.

Yan once commented that she considered the Cultural Revolution period as formative years that shaped and formed her outlook on life and worldview. She says, "people's behaviors remain a mystery to me in many years after the Cultural Revolution"(Zhang 29). In her words, her fascination with the period is best represented by observing and understanding humanity under "extreme circumstances," because "in a non-extreme circumstance, certain aspects of humanity can be hidden forever. I do not write about any 'political movement,' I am concerned about the fundamentals of humanity, something that all nations and peoples can understand and can resonate with" (Zhang 29).

In *White Snake*, as in many of her other works, she focuses her writing on how humanity responds to "extreme circumstances." These "extreme circumstances" during the Cultural Revolution can easily trigger a metamorphosis, a self-alienating change in self-perception and identity. The "metamorphosis" used in the old folktale of White Snake indicates a desire of the "monstrous other" (snake) to be like a human and to live and experience the human world because the attractiveness of "love" is a foreign concept to the snakes and they find it enchanting.

There are two levels of meaning of "metamorphosis" in the text. On the one hand, the "metamorphosis" is treated as a theme of alienation in the totalitarian state or under "extreme circumstances: the Cultural Revolution, and the rigidity, the conformity of humanity under the Maoism. The revolutionary rhetoric defines life and alienates people from arts, from each other, further removed from decency, civility, its cultural past, beauty, sublimity, the transcendence spiritual power of arts and beauty. A woman is exiled from the human world in the original story, the woman is exiled from the man's world, the woman is exiled from the discourse of history; as it continues in the Maoist masculine discourse, women continue to be marginalized, and voices are not heard in the genderless society, where autonomy and self-definition and self-

representation are denied. On the other hand, in portraying this ambiguously homosexual love between Sun and Yan, Yan points out the importance of love, of appreciation, of beauty in the "extreme circumstances." In works like *White Snake*, Yan says, "I attempt to let my reader never feel that it is an unusual romance. I write it in the same way I write about man and woman. All relationship have their sublime and sacred components" (Zhang 29). The unusual intimacy and love between the two women transcends the sordid reality, offers hope and healing of historical and political wounds inflicted on their lives.

This story and much of Yan's writing on the Maoist past focus on the agency and subjectivity of each individual's story, individuals who, instead of becoming victims of historical atrocity, survived and strengthened their belief in love and life. The affirmative message celebrating humanity in the extreme historical and social circumstances becomes her signature in writing of the historical past. The celebratory stance is seen via her confirmation of love, reaffirming female sexuality, and questioning gender identity in Maoist China. Therefore, in Yan's reflection of this dark chapter of twentieth-century China's history, the power of an individual is affirmed rather than undermined or buried under grief or sense of loss, as in Jin's

case. Her work may not be politically explicit in criticizing the Maoist regime, as many of Ha Jin's works are. Yan's writings on Mao's China send out messages of hope for humanity, showing the beautiful and sublime qualities of humanity surviving in Mao's time.

However, this does not mean her work does not take a political stance or carry a political message. Her affirmation of the sublimity of the power of the individual is itself a political stance against Maoist discourse on totalitarianism. In this piece, her critical reflection on "Chineseness" is to question the rhetoric of gender politics in Maoist time. In terms of gender equality, Maoist discourse dictates that "men and women are the same," which re-establishes the "masculine norm" and erases gender differences between man and woman in social practice. In particular, it continues to suppress female desire and expression of female sexuality. Yan's participation in and understanding of the socialist revolutions and political movements, plus her perceptive female sensitivity, give her work a feminist imprint that is full of compassionate appreciation of the unique experiences of the Chinese women living in the Maoist time.

CHAPTER 3. CHINESE IMMIGRANT NARRATIVES: CHINESE IN AMERICA

3.1 Chinese/American Immigrant Identity: Renegotiating Homeland, Language, and Freedom in Ha Jin's *A Free Life* (2007)

The subject of China pervades all of Ha Jin's works preceding *A Free Life* (2007). *A Free Life*, however, marks a departure from his previous work, in that Jin moves the narrative's location from China to America. Jin's early writing takes place exclusively in China; later, in his novel *War Trash* (2004), the Chinese, Americans, and Koreans interact in Korea during the Korean War; finally, he shifts to America, the place he now calls home, in *A Free Life*. The novel, the most autobiographical so far, took him two decades to write and revise. It demonstrates in great detail an immigrant's life and the consciousness of what being Chinese immigrant entails. This move in subject location indicates Jin is finally coming to terms with his own immigrant identity and centers his narratives on the American landscape, completing the transnational circle of his writing career.

A Free Life appears to follow a familiar narrative of assimilation. It continues the narrative in *The Crazy* (2002), which ends with the protagonist fleeing China after the

Tiananmen Square protests of 1989. The story of *A Free Life* begins as protagonist Nan Wu and his wife, Pingping, welcome their young son, Taotao, from China to the United States in the wake of the Tiananmen Square protests. After leaving China in 1985, Nan Wu enters a graduate program at Brandeis University. After 1989 Tiananmen protests, disillusioned with the Chinese government, he makes something of his political stand, and he is implicated in a far-fetched plot to kidnap the children of Chinese Communist Party members who are living in the United States. When the kidnapping plot comes to light, Nan Wu quits the Ph.D. program and leaves Brandeis. He becomes a house sitter in a Boston suburb, working his way up, first in a Chinese restaurant in New York's Chinatown and eventually owns a restaurant in the suburbs of Atlanta. On a superficial level, then, it seems the Wu family achieves their American dream by having a business and owning a house. However, their economic mobility is not the boon it seems, as his “immigrant success story” leaves Nan Wu feeling unfulfilled. What feels important to him is his literary ambition of becoming an English-language poet. After a series of negotiations, Wu reaches a more mature vision of freedom and Chinese/American immigrant identity.

The novel continues Ha Jin's paramount thematic concern of the triangular relationship between the individual, state, and Chineseness. Only this time, Chineseness is not only defined by the overwhelming sign system produced and reinforced by the Communist state in China, as in *Waiting* (1999) but is also embedded in the Chinese American history set in the predominant U.S. landscape and national space. A crisis in Chinese identity occurs in the protagonist of *Waiting*, and it continues, but transforms, into the discourse of Chinese/American immigrant narrative. The narrative of *A Free Life* spans from 1989, immediately after the Tiananmen student protests, to Christmas Eve of 1998.

This chapter will offer a close reading of *A Free Life*, addressing the prevalent themes: homeland, language, and freedom. I consider these questions: How do the Chinese in diaspora conceive of the homeland, language, and freedom in relation to national allegiance once they have left China, filled with disillusionment for their mother country? What happens when the United States also proves to be a disappointment and their “American dream” is shattered? How are their disoriented conditions living in the United States expressed in a way that shows their continued efforts in contesting Chineseness in relation to their new nation? How does claiming

such identities as “expatriate,” “dissident,” “migrant,” and “immigrant” correlate with different layers of affiliation or disassociation towards “Chineseness”? I argue that embedded in the novel's immigrant narrative, the themes of homeland, language, and freedom provide an exploration of a Chinese/American immigrant identity that exceeds both America and China nation-state constraints. Jin creatively deploys the English language as trans-cultural translation and redefines individual identity in relation to the concepts of home and homeland, as well as demystifies the concepts of the American dream and freedom.

3.1.1 “An Individual’s Homeland”: Redefining Homeland

In Chinese diasporas, the concept of “homeland” is closely embedded in Chinese *gen* (根) culture. “Gen culture” is translated as “roots culture,” similar to the Biblical idea of a Jewish “homeland.”¹⁵ It has been regarded as one major influence in the construction of a new identity for Chinese émigrés. According to the Chinese scholar L. Ling-Chi Wang, the Chinese word *gen*

¹⁵ Diaspora studies originally apply to the Jewish biblical example of forced exile from a homeland. It is limited to describing "literal or figurative processes of scattering, separation, branching off, departure, banishment, and winnowing" (Edwards 82). Therefore, the critical angles from diaspora studies often examine the loss of homeland and emphasize a collective memory of oppression and the desire for return. "Homeland" sometimes is replaced with the synonym "motherland," metaphorically indicating an inseverable maternal connection. It often serves as a reference point for one's national loyalty, identity, and belonging.

carries several meanings and has an intricate relation with one's recognition of his or her cultural and social identity. Wang argues that *gen* serves as the source from which one derives one's personal identity, and he regards the bond the Chinese have with the roots in their culture as "unique, sacred and eternal" (28). Frequently, it is associated with one's birthplace, ancestral village, or hometown. At the turn of the twentieth century, the rise of China as modern nation-state implicates an additional meaning of "Chineseness," an allegiance to China's modern nation-state. On additional meanings of "gen culture" in expatriate Chinese communities, Wang argues that roots culture takes on "Chinese culture and a geographic entity called China—one's *zuguo* 祖国(ancestral nation or motherland)" (29). "China" and *zuguo* become a conflated term, interchangeable with "homeland," "motherland," or "country." *Zuguo* often serves as a reference point for one's national loyalty, identity, and belonging. "Motherland" in particular indicates a maternal connection that cannot be severed. Sometimes "homeland" refers to an actual physical, concrete hometown and homeland and at other times to an abstract idea of nation or country. A "Chineseness" that derives from "roots culture" carries an emotional, intellectual, and spiritual attachment to the "homeland."

In China, there has been a long literary and cultural tradition that reinforces the “roots culture.” In Sheng-mei Ma's view “the age-old exile tradition” can be traced back to Qu Yuan (340-278 BC), who banishes himself from the court in protest of the emperor's policies and committed suicide while in exile fulfilling his loyal position to the court. Similarly, Chinese immigrant literature, as Ma argues, has been characterized with “the textual construct of idealized ‘Chineseness,’” and the expatriate writers' effort to “preserve Chinese integrity as they migrate to alien cultures” (111). Often appearing in these texts are laments and sentiments of the loss of homeland and collective memory of oppression and the desire for return. Given this, Ha Jin's *A Free Life* seems to be an effort to subvert the “roots” myth in Chinese identity formation. It is a piece of work breaking away from the tradition of exile literature. Instead of constructing a hero who continues to pledge his loyalty to the court, the “origin,” and the country, it gives us a protagonist who deserts his native country and rejects the notion of loyalty to the nation or the homeland.

In *A Free Life*, Ha Jin has created a broad spectrum of exiled, diasporic, and immigrant characters in the world of Chinese diaspora after 1989. The novel is situated around the time of

the Tiananmen Square massacre, which changed the mentality of Chinese émigrés or immigrants abroad. The Tiananmen Square massacre becomes in the contemporary Chinese and Chinese diaspora community a singularly important marker of the rupture of space and places in the ensuing transnational movement of thousands of “wandering intellectuals” who decided to sojourn and/ or settle in a nation other than their own. The choice of “sojourning” or “settling” becomes a contended moment in their position with regard to “homeland.” On the one hand, they have to survive the memory of the violence and horror that modern and contemporary Chinese history inflicted upon its people in the “homeland.” On the other hand, being uprooted from their origins in China, they have experienced a strong sense of displacement and dispossession in the United States that invokes another round of negotiation of relationship with the “homeland.”

In the story, Jin continues his critique of a lack of individual stance in Chinese diasporic community, influenced by China’s politics in the distance, or crippled by the past that can barely make sense in the present. For example, Manping Liu, a respected exiled scholar and intellectual, who lives a jobless life in New York, squanders the money his wife works hard to earn. Liu's wife tells Nan in outrage, “He dabbled in stocks with the sweat money I made. Yesterday alone

he lost more than two thousand dollars” (146). At one point, Nan describes an exile's life in relation to the homeland:

Mr. Liu was an exile, whose life had been shaped by the past and who could exist only with reference to the central power that had banished him from China. Here lay Mr. Liu's tragedy—he couldn't possibly separate himself from the state's apparatus that could always control and torment him. Without the frame of reference already formed in his homeland, his life would have lost its meaning and bearings. That must be why so many exiles, wrecked with nostalgia, would eulogize suffering and patriotism (356).

In Nan's view, nostalgia among the exile community after the Tiananmen Square massacre debilitates their ability to sever their attachment to China and Chineseness. Liu's tragedy lies in the complicit role he plays in relation to the power of Chinese government. The power that banishes him is also the power that he clings to. He takes a stance of political opposition to the Chinese government, yet he can't separate himself from it. And worst of all, exiles' political stance, their voice, and their political and cultural relevance and influence

dwindle and disappear once they claim "exile" status abroad. In other places, Nan also says that their life has been defined by "the yoke of their significant past," (365) which makes restarting their new life difficult in the United States. And the "former privileged life (that) had deprived them of the vitality and stamina needed for grappling with adversities to take root in American soil" (138). Like many others in the novel, Liu eventually decided to return to China after he was diagnosed with cancer. In order to return, he made a deal with the Chinese government, promising to keep silent on politically sensitive issues. Liu's incompetence at being an independent individual artist in the United States is a telling example of how a Chinese individual, particularly an intellectual, remains subservient to Chinese Communist control from afar.

Ha Jin writes in the essay "An Individual's Homeland," in *The Writer as Migrant*,

Many exiles, emigrants, expatriates, and even some immigrants are possessed with the desire to someday return to their native lands. The nostalgia often deprives them of a sense of direction and prevents them from putting down roots

anywhere. The present and the future have been impaired by their displacement, and their absence from their original countries gives them nothing but pain (63).

To restart life in the United States means to live a life full of strife from the bottom up, linguistically, economically, and culturally. These well-established writers, artists, and scholars have yet to forgo all previous fame and achievements to settle in a foreign land. Therefore, a lot of them find solace and consolation in returning to the homeland, clinging to their Chineseness.

Danning Meng, Nan's fellow graduate student in physics, also decides to return to China. His decision is more or less based on cultural identity and belonging that he finds lacking in the United States. Before he leaves, he has a conversation with Nan over Chinese identity and homeland. Danning said, "No matter where I go, I feel I'm a Chinese to the marrow. I'm terribly homesick recently, perhaps because I'm getting old and soft-headed" (96). Danning feels bound by his feeling of homesickness and eventually decides to go back to China, the place that he calls his "roots" (97). In Danning's argument, his "Chineseness" hinders him from belonging to America. In China, Danning achieves official approval and financial security by turning into a prolific and popular writer and a member of the Beijing's Writer's Association. However, in

Nan's eyes, Danning's writing is in regression and degradation. He never produces anything better than his first novel drawing on the experience of living in America. Nan comments on his later novels by pointing out that 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” (473). The erosive power of market and government censorship again block the real independence of a writer’s creative process.

Nan Wu disagrees on several occasions with the concept of “national pride,” as well as the hopes for the Chinese government shared by many Chinese exiles and ordinary Chinese immigrants. For Nan, it is important to dissociate “homeland” from “country,” which is deeply influenced by Chinese roots culture in diaspora community. As an exile, he holds a strong antagonism toward the Chinese authoritarian government, especially after the catastrophic incident that happened. Due to an outlandish kidnapping plot, Nan's passport fails to be renewed by the Chinese embassy. It aggravates and severs his political identification with the country. For a while, before his naturalization, he stays as a “countryless” man, living in a stateless limbo. Arguing with his friend Danning about emotional attachment to the motherland, Nan says “China

isn't my country anymore. I spit at China because it treats its citizens like gullible children and always prevents them from growing up into real individuals" (96). We seem to hear an echo of Jin's *Waiting* when Lin Kong turns out to be a tragic hero who never had a chance to claim an authentic self.

Nan's presence at a discussion of the book, *China Can Say No*,¹⁶ It is the last time for him to attend activities relating to China. Facing the outpouring of arguments infused with strong emotions of nationalism and patriotism, Nan could not help addressing the audience,

You people always talk about your nation, your China, as if every one of you were a kingpin of that country. Has it ever occurred to you that this obsession is dangerous? I mean to let a country dominate an individual's life and outweigh everything else. What's the definition of fascism? Do you know? (496)

He goes on calmly to define fascism, according to Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, tenth edition: "The first principle of fascism is to exalt country and race above the individual"

¹⁶ *China Can Say No* (*Zhongguo keyi shuo bu* 中国可以说) is a Chinese national bestseller in 1996. The book is non-fictional writing with a strong nationalistic sentiment, arguing against American's foreign policy towards "containing China" and against the uncritical embrace of Western values that ignores Chinese heritage and tradition.

(496). One of the legacies of Mao, as I argued earlier in the chapter, is the unchecked power of the state over the individual, which eventually led to many political and policy disasters in Mao's China. The parallel and comparison between Chinese nationalism and fascism is an uncomfortable and unwelcome one for the audience. Nan tries to get across the point of how dangerous it is when state power supersedes individual rights, particularly in light of 1989, when the state inflicted violence on its own civilians. His words fall on deaf ears. Greatly disappointed and feeling he no longer belongs, Nan concludes that "Their ilk had the herd mentality that assumed the fulfillment of one's selfhood depended on the rise and growth of a tribe" (496). The "herd mentality" of a "tribe" forces Nan to distance himself from China and from a Chinese diaspora community that he perceives as invested in the past and in patriotism and nationalism.

Ha Jin, in his essays in *The Writer as Migrant*, regards this homeland attachment as "unnecessary" and "anachronistic," "unreasonable" and "unjustified." Employing the metaphor of a tree to describe Chinese roots culture, he says that if we look under our feet "You will not find gnarled growths sprouting through the soles" (22). "Roots," according to Jin, "are a

conservative myth, designed to keep us in place. The debunking of the tree metaphor makes it clear that human beings are different from trees and should be rootless and entirely mobile” (22).

To echo Jin’s point of view, Nan is set up as an antithesis to many members of the Chinese diaspora. Nan does not seem to privilege the origin of the homeland, nor does he stress loss or express nostalgic desires with a homeward gaze. To go from “roots” to “rootless,” Nan asserts his individualistic stance as a Chinese immigrant. In the process, he has to go through various steps of negotiation and reconfirmation. Nan appears in the novel first as a Ph.D. candidate in political science at the time the Tiananmen Square massacre happens. However, he feels appalled by the “horror and violence of the homeland that has done to its people” and becomes disillusioned with the Chinese government and by and large with the country itself. Nan’s decision to give up his candidacy becomes the first step in his transition from a puppet who can’t make life decisions to an independent individual.

Nan sets himself apart from many Chinese in exile and the immigrant community. In other words, Nan seemed “de-brainwashed” (M. Zhang 29). From the time Nan decides to stay in the United States up to the point where he applies for U.S. citizenship, his concept of “homeland”

expands. It is important to mark the difference between Nan, an immigrant who intends to settle in the United States, and Manping, Danning, and Bao Yuan, among many other diasporic sojourners who finally decide to return to China. As an immigrant, very early on, Nan starts to see the fluidity and mobile nature of the definition of “homeland.” Nan needs to make a connection and distinction between “homeland” and “home.” He also calls for a redefinition. He argues that, unlike the definition of Chinese “homeland,” in English, “homeland” has two meanings: a place of origin and the place where your home is. Therefore, home as a term refers not only to the point of return (the homeward gaze back to the nation of origin), but also the point of arrival, where you create the new home. Thus, the home, Jin believes, “can be created, can be made, then home is in the process of becoming, instead of [being] fixed in the past” (Jin, Interview by GoGwilt).

The idea of homeland within a specific locale is no longer adequate. The initial reaction of his son, Taotao, on the first day of his arrival in America, has given Nan a revelation that “home is where his parents are and where he feels safe. He doesn't need a country,” after watching Taotao absorbed happily in the cartoon *Tom and Jerry* (13). In *The Writer as Migrant*,

Ha Jin echoes Nan's thoughts regarding homeland as a more embracing and transformative term.

It is "something the migrant should be able to build away from his native land." Therefore

"home-land is where you build your home" (84). The transition from the homeland to home

dissociates its connection to the nation and instead establishes it as an individual choice. When

Nan makes a conscious choice to become a U.S. citizen, he feels that "he had been disowned by

China long ago." He also thinks "China is our native land, while America is the land of our

children—that's to say, a place of our future" (495).

Nan problematizes the concept of "homeland" and redefines it by highlighting the complicated relationship between the temporal "then" and "now," and the spatial "there" and

"here." Instead of looking backward to his past in China, he looks forward to the future here in

the United States with his family. His choice no longer reflects national allegiance, but rather a

personal and family choice. This revision of "homeland" empowers the individual with a

personal definition. By undermining national allegiance and by emphasizing personal choice,

Nan destabilizes the concept of "homeland." It becomes a space that can be renamed and rebuilt.

However, it does not mean that the past should be discarded completely, but instead, as Jin says in *The Writer as Migrant*, “we have to strive to use parts of our past to facilitate our journeys. As we travel along, we should also imagine how to rearrange the landscapes of our envisioned homelands” (85-86). Nan’s identity transition from “sojourner” to an immigrant also involves mentally, spiritually, and culturally acknowledging America as the land for him and his family. A new homeland is imagined symbolically through emotional attachment to the American landscape as lived space and acquiring American land as a home base to shelter the family. On his move with the whole family from Boston to settle in Georgia to open the restaurant, Nan describes at length the beautiful American land he sees on the road. What impressed Nan most was “the openness of the land, whose immensity and abundance seemed to dwarf humans...that if he died, he'd like to be buried in such a place, so open, so unpolluted by human beings” (181). In comparison, “he had written to his friends in China that nature was extraordinarily generous to America; it was a place that made their native land seem overused and exhausted” (180). At the end of the novel, Nan wins a round-trip flight from Atlanta to Beijing in a supermarket raffle. During his visit to the ancestral land, he sees signs of the new

prosperity but is unmoved: "He wondered why so many overseas Chinese would retire to this mad country where you had to bribe and feast others to get anything done. A person like him would not be able to survive here. Now he wanted all the more to live and die in America" (525-526).

Traditionally, as part of cultural Chineseness, one aspect of "roots culture" is the attachment to the ancestral land. "Luo ye gui gen" 落叶归根, literally translated as "falling leaves return to the roots," usually indicates a proper burial in an ancestral land. During the Chinese Exclusion era (1882-1943), Chinese were barred from immigration, and Chinese immigrants were not allowed to become naturalized U.S. citizens. When Chinese immigrants died in the U.S, Chinese associations in the United States made sure that the caskets of Chinese immigrants would be taken care of and sent back to China to obtain a proper burial in their ancestral place. Nan's quick adoption of American land as the land of his death reaffirms his acceptance of America as part of his new homeland. This sense of home and belonging becomes particularly true once he paid off the mortgage of his house, when he exclaims, "at last they had put their feet on the ground they could call their own" (419).

To distance himself from the Chinese government is a much easier move considering the Chinese government's atrocity of killing civilians at the beginning of the story; however, to distance himself emotionally away from 'homeland' is a difficult task. One of the tensions in Nan's life is that he doesn't passionately love Pingping, his hardworking and loyal wife. His only homeward gaze represents an obsession with Beina, his ex-girlfriend, whom he loves and for whom he keeps a place in his heart, even admitting to Pingping that he married her out of necessity and convenience instead of love. Beina is his muse, inspiring him in poetic creation, the woman for whom he has written numerous love poems. In all his attempts to move forward and be forward thinking regarding his life with Pingping and Taotao here in the States, dreams of Beina persist and recur frequently. The absence of Beina in his American life prevents him from freedom of artistic creation. Beina is seen as an allegorical image of a romanticized and idealized version of China. Nan's inhibition in writing poetry is seen as his inability to let go of the sentiments toward the old country. China is like Beina, whom he once had and cannot have again.

His obsession with Beina and ignorance of Pingping, his wife's love, and suffering, finally drive him back to look up Beina during his trip back to China. In China, he gets the

information that Beina has resided in America for a while. He visits Beina and finds out that, after sixteen years apart, Beina is no longer his long-lost love but “just an ordinary woman with listless eyes and an incipient double chin” (587). The secret meeting with Beina makes him realize that he loves Pinging; he claims to Beina “I know what true love is like now. You've never loved any man devotedly, whereas my wife loves me and is always ready to suffer with me” (587). At this moment, the former uncertainty of his feelings, pulled between Beina and Pingping, disappears, and Nan is able to see through the imagined illusion of the attachment to Beina. In an allegoric sense, Nan's emotional attachment to China, his motherland, his spiritual homeland, can only be severed by estranging himself from this relationship. In his dissertation, regarding the analysis of the image of Beina, Rong Guo writes that only “after the discarding of his infantilism, could he walk out of the complex of China at the end and enjoy peace and tranquility, freed from any political and ideological perplexity” (224).

The story ends on a Christmas when Nan produces his first poem dedicated to Pingping, entitled “Belated Love.” He uses the imagery of a kite wandering many years without self-consciously knowing that its string is attached to a loving hand. Only after years of hardship,

when he is defeated, hurt, and disillusioned, does he say in the final stanza, "What I mean is to say, 'My love, I've come home'" (620). The "lines came naturally and effortlessly" and contrast sharply with his earlier writer's block (618). Disillusioned by his obsession with his old love, Beina, he finally recognizes and realizes his passion for Pingping, which is real and present. The love reunion with Pingping, the final submission to his life with Pingping in the United States, speaks to his realization that now home is where love is, and love is what he and Pingping have always had.

3.1.2. "The Language of Betrayal": "Chineseness" in Trans-cultural Translation

Nobody would deny the quintessential position language plays in one's identity recognition and identification. In his previous work, by consciously employing English to narrate stories happening in China, Jin questions this presumed connection between language and national allegiance. *A Free Life* is the most autobiographical novel of his work to date. Nan, as a poet, aspires to write in English. The novel embodies the experiences of Jin as a writer who writes in an adopted language. It foregrounds language as the focal point to negotiate both "Chinese" and "American" nationalistic claims. Ha Jin uses Nan to speak about the linguistic

connection with one's identity, via affirmation and negation. On the one hand, writing in English poses a threat to “Chineseness” as well as estrangement from China and Chineseness. On the other, the choice of writing in English is an accrual of literacy, cultural capital, and acculturation to Americanness by connecting intellectually within American literary tradition.

As a Chinese immigrant in America, language epitomizes the linguistic struggle of a typical Chinese immigrant experience. In several interviews, Jin claims that using English is a necessity for survival when living in the United States. In an interview with Dave Weich of Powell's Books, Ha Jin says that “the core of the immigrant experience” is “how to learn the language—or give up learning the language!—but without the absolute mastery of the language, which is impossible for an immigrant. Your life is always affected by the insufficiency”¹⁷. We see this in character Nan, who carries with him a dictionary and seizes every moment to learn English. Now and then, he would take it out and go over a few entries he has marked in pencil (63). This is because Nan knows that in this land the language is like “a body of water in which he had to learn how to swim and breathe, even though he’d feel out of his element whenever he

¹⁷ See interview Ha Jin has with Dave Weich on powells.com, <http://www.powells.com/authors/Jin.html>

used it. If he did not try hard to adapt himself, developing new ‘lungs and gills’ for this alien water, his life would be confined and atrophied, and eventually wither away” (192). This sense of linguistic inadequacy, insecurity, and insufficiency is commonly shared in immigrant communities.

Additionally, language is regarded by Nan as a medium of freedom of expression—a privilege seldom accorded a Chinese intellectual and artist—and was especially attractive for those who had never experienced such freedom. Nan's experiences in China tell him that Chinese, as a silenced and censored language by the government, has lost its appeal for channeling creative energy. Nan regarded the Chinese language as tainted by politics and reduced merely to its political functions like "propaganda" (95). China's political ideology contaminates the language. It severely fractures its originality and vitality in expressing ideas and thoughts. Using English as a venue for freedom of expression would neutralize much of the politicized language in Chinese. Later in the novel, Nan also noted the erosive power of the market, and the delicate relationship between the state, the market, and the intellectuals in the post-Mao era in China. Danning wrote only historical romance novels in China to make money, and he says to Nan "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" (532).

The decision not to use Chinese, his mother tongue, has greatly impacted Ha Jin's way of thinking and writing. Self-consciously, Jin regards the English as the "language of betrayal"; he writes in *The Writer as Immigrant*, "linguistic betrayal is the ultimate step the migrant writer dares to take" (31). The word "betrayal" is a politically charged term that is also indicative of him distancing, disregarding, and disclaiming his "Chineseness," as ingrained in the language he grows up with. In the novel, Nan's decision to separate from his native tongue is a symbolic gesture, as the massacre in Tiananmen Square exacerbates his feelings toward China. Nan is alone in his commitment to writing in English among the Chinese literary aspirants in his overseas Chinese circle in the United States. In his desire to write poetry in English, Nan has been unfairly criticized as a "madman" and "banana"¹⁸ who despises China and its language (496). Nan's anger over "Chinese nationalism" and patriotism stems partially from his belief in

¹⁸ "Banana" refers to Chinese /Americans who have yellow skin on the outside, yet are Americanized on the inside.

the artist's freedom of expression and the separation between the arts and the politics. For Nan, the language of betrayal is to seek ultimate artistic freedom. English provides another frame of thinking and opens up new territory for the imagination and poetic creativity. For him, language is only a vessel for achieving the universal literary value to which any serious literature should aspire. The function of his poetry was to "transcend history and to outlast politics" (95). "No national pride should supersede the value of his poetry (95).

Nan's acculturation to Americanness, an assimilation process, is also best represented by his choice of English as his language of poetry writing. In this sense, partaking of Americanness is to earn cultural capital, literacy, and follow great English literary tradition. Literary allusions help Nan make sense of the most mundane events of his life. It becomes clear in the literary references through which Nan imagines a sense of cultural connection. The way Nan interprets and adapts them to his life as an immigrant reveals a critical aspect of the meaning of cultural communication and belonging in the novel. Nan has a nickname at Brandeis "Mr. Wagon Man" because he often quotes Emerson's saying "Hitch your wagon to a star" (55). In effect, Emerson's saying measures the development and disillusionment of Nan's American dream.

Eventually, he understands to be the "true meaning" of Emerson's saying. At the end of the novel, Nan realizes the material realities and cultural context of his life in America: "To be a free individual, he had to go his own way, had to endure loneliness and isolation, and had to give up the illusion of success in order to accept his diminished state as a new immigrant and as a learner of this alphabet" (619).

In another instance, Nan reads Faulkner's advice about the writing process and takes to his heart: "The writer must teach himself that the basest of all things is to be afraid; and teaching himself that, forget it forever, leaving no room in his workshop for anything but the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed..." (604). Nan takes Faulkner's wisdom to speak to his own experiences as a writer working in a non-native language. "It was this fear that 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" (605). Faulkner's musings are adapted and reframed to address issues of language particular to a Chinese immigrant experience, opening up new contexts for this and the other literary allusions Nan cites. Arnold Pan argues in "Belonging

Across Cultures: Immigration and Citizenship in a Free Life” that “It is through an encyclopedic knowledge of literature that Nan comes to identify himself culturally as an American, most powerfully articulated in the aphorisms he cites from Emerson, Whitman, Faulkner, and Hemingway as he hones his own trade as a writer” (20).

In the novel, Ha Jin explores English as a hybrid linguistic form that can invigorate and revitalize itself by absorbing other elements. Jin argues in *The Writer as Immigrant* that “to accomplish a style in his adopted tongue,” he had to “sacrifice his mother tongue, while borrowing its strength and resources”; eventually, he finds, “human experiences ...and the artistic spirit will survive and can resonate to other audiences if the work is genuine literature” (60). In *A Free Life*, Nan uses his poetry journal to wrestle with the question of why he wrote poetry in English, responding to a magazine editor who asks, “Can you imagine your work becoming part of our language?” Nan bristles: “I have no answer to that xenophobic question, which ignores the fact that vitality of English has partly resulted from its ability to assimilate all kinds of alien energies” (628). Though English is often regarded as a homogenized linguistic form that has much to do with the history of imperialism and colonialism, here Ha Jin's reference

to world English denotes not only a living language used in English-speaking nations but also a linguistic form enriched by previously colonized nations and regions, as well as second-language learners such as Nan and Jin themselves. This is not to say that the English language can be devoid of political connotations, but instead, Nan's remark directs our attention to the receiving end of English and allows us to realize that as immigrants they are not passive recipients but active agents.

According to Ha Jin, "Translatability is a standard of literature" (Chen 1). Though Ha Jin's English passages sometimes carry Chinese overtones, the fluidity and mobility in writing enrich the English language while at the same time accomplishing the task of trans-cultural translation. According to the linguist Hang Zhang, "The Chineseness of Ha Jin's fiction is achieved through his creative adoption of the English language, and the innovative recreation of the sensations of his native experiences" (308). Jin's creative reworking of the Chinese language is not only a translation but also a device that carries the weight of cultural messages and meanings. In this context, his literary creativity appears in the forms of lexical innovation and cultural metaphors that achieve a dramatic and literary effect. Eventually, his translation has

been able to transcend any specific cultural ambiance to which both Jin and his character Nan aspire.

In this novel, Jin employs a typographical device that renders a distinct style of linguistic and translation elements in his work that is different from the other works he has produced so far. He uses italicized English to write down conversations that were conducted in Mandarin (between Nan and his wife and among the overseas Chinese community), separate from the rest of the text, which was conducted in English, including the narrator's thoughts. This device endeavors to highlight things that are not lost in translation, but are retrievable by translation. Some expressions are translated directly from Mandarin. While angered by his father's letter for more money, Nan says, "Sure, they think we are *making tons of money here, eating nutritious food, drinking quality wine, and living like gods*" (330). The italicized sentence is a common expression translated from Chinese to describe a comfortable life. In some other places, Jin has translated the common Chinese ways of addressing people. For example, when Nan's uncle comes up to Nan filled with spite that his nephew hasn't fulfilled his wish, he says, "*Big nephew*, you don't remember me? No? You have a short memory" (564). The address "big" in front of the

relationship carries a sarcastic overtone to indicate someone who has shown disrespect. These trans-cultural translations successfully deliver Chinese culture and experience in an adopted language.

Ha Jin's linguistic ingenuity also lies in the ability to blend the linguistic forms and semantics of Chinese and English to create a hybrid language of his own. In the novel, many metaphors transposed from Chinese correspond to expressions already existing in English. In one case, Nan blamed Pingping for encouraging their son to fight; his wife says "*I'm already a frightened mouse in this country. We don't need another wimp in our family*" (269). The metaphor of a frightened mouse indicates meekness in both English and Chinese. In another example, Nan comments on his life in America, "I'm like that *horse, always moving from place to place and serving others. As long as the harness is on me, I can't take a run for joy or lie down for weariness. I have to work, work, work until I die*" (39). It is evident to both English and Chinese readers that horse as a metaphor for the trait of being hard-working is common in both cultures. In both cases, English, as a translation, is no longer mono-directional but has

multiple receiving ends. The form seems no longer relevant, but the content reverberates with the understanding shared by readers from both Chinese and American backgrounds.

The frequent use of proverbs and idioms from Chinese life and folklore complements the use of metaphors. Commenting on his friend Danning Meng's relationship with Anni, Nan says, "Why couldn't Danning see that Anni meant to leave him? He always bragged about this and that but never *saw the fire in his backyard*" (41). The italicized phrase is a Chinese proverb "后院着火" indicating the husband is ignorant of a household issue, and most likely the marriage is on the rocks. "Backyard" often refers to domestic space inhabited by a married woman. In another example, after his friend Yafang was raped, Nan tells her, "Don't be so sad, in this place, we have to be tough and have to endure a lot of humiliation. Sometimes you even have to *swallow a tooth knocked off your gum*" (143). The italicized phrase is a Chinese idiom that means terrible things do happen and need to be endured.

On the one hand, both Jin and Nan's choice of writing in English is considered a linguistic betrayal by their Chinese countrymen and Chinese critics; however, they retain in their creative writing distinctive elements of Chineseness while at the same time evading certain detrimental

effects, such as the mother tongue's ability to inhibit one's creativity and ingenuity. This hybrid English, as a medium and the theme in the novel, redefines the slash in Chinese/American identity with attentiveness towards immigrant subject formation beyond linguistic boundaries.

The choice between Chinese and English poses an unavoidable but intricate knot in the formation of this new Chinese/American immigrant identity that Ha Jin tries to portray. It poses another linguistic space for negotiation of Chineseness and Americanness and to balance these two in Ha Jin's presentation of Chinese/American identity formation.

3.1.3. American Dream: Freedom to be an Individual English Poet

Nan commented on the double meaning of "freedom" to Yafang, his coworker at a New York restaurant where he apprentices to be a cook:

Freedom is meaningless if you don't know how to use it. We've been oppressed and confined so long that it's hard for us to change our mindset and achieve real freedom. We're used to the existence defined by evasions and negations. Most of our individual tastes and natural appetites have been bridled with caution and fear.

It's more difficult to break the self-imposed tyranny than the external constraints.

(132)

Here Nan lays out the triangular relationship between the state, the individual, and freedom.

Speaking of the lived experience in China, an authoritarian communist state, Nan thinks the individual will find it hard to assert freedom when the individual has become accustomed to being subservient to the state, and the communist culture prioritizes the collectivism. What's worse, the individual internalizes the collective oppression by “evasions” and “negations.” Thus, any individualism or the development of it has been “bridled by caution and fear.” The process of breaking away from all the external and internal limitations and constraints is not an easy one. Additionally, Nan not only speaks about the desire for the “abstract” freedom per se but about the process of seeking and realizing freedom for the individual, so that the individual will become an autonomous individual. Instead of “being,” the process of “becoming” is what Nan stresses. This understanding of “freedom” as a process paves the way for Nan's immigrant narrative of becoming an individual of free will, economic independence, and eventually artistic freedom in the later part of the book.

In Mao's Communist China, one freedom that Nan found lacking or wanting is freedom of choice and respect for free will. He majored in political science because he was “assigned to study” the subject when admitted to college, even though he had never liked it. Later, he went on to earn a master's degree because he “hadn't had any choice but to stay within the same field” (17). He originally planned to go back and teach at his alma mater after finishing his doctoral studies in the United States. His decision changed after the Tiananmen Square massacre when, feeling betrayed by his government, he gave up his studies and decided to become an independent man in the United States. Nan can't help but compare his previous life in China while contemplating his future life in the United States.

Such an independent condition was new to him. Back in China, he had always been a member of a work unit that provided a salary, shelter (usually a bed or at most a room), coupons for cloth and grain and cooking oil, medical care, and sometimes even free condoms. As long as he didn't cause trouble for the authorities, his livelihood was secure. Now he would have to earn a living by himself and also support his family. He was free, free to choose his way and to

make something of himself. But what were the choices available to him? Could he survive in this land? The feeling of uncertainty overwhelmed him. (17)

In Mao's China, people's livelihood is controlled and micromanaged by the work unit, the *danwei*, the smallest communist organization in the workplace. By controlling people's economic life, the state demands loyalty from its people. This kind of patronage requires conformity and surrender of any individual free choice and will; at times the authoritarian state uses economic prowess to rein in unruly elements, suppress dissident voices, and coerce its people into collaboration. In Ha Jin's observation, people of Nan's generation from mainland Communist China have been "indoctrinated to believe that there was an unstated contract between yourself and your country. As a citizen, you were supposed to serve your country, and, as for your livelihood, your country would take care of it for you" (*The Migrant as Writer* 26). Even though the state provides and shelters people, the provision is what prevents the realization of the true individual freedom. For Nan, the start of his immigrant life is to defy any affiliation with the state or the collective that would compromise the independent stance of the individual.

In the passage above, Nan imagines hopefully that America will afford him the opportunity to be independent, yet the uncertainty remains. On the one hand, it is liberating; but on the other hand, it is terrifying. The freedom of choice comes with anxiety. He quits his graduate studies at Brandeis, thus also forfeiting his monthly stipend, the only steady family income. In a foreign land, he has to relearn how to be independent first by earning a living and providing for the family, working from the very bottom up in American society. He works at menial labor, such as being a guard, a night watchman, a busboy, and a cook's aide, and then moves on to be a cook in his own restaurant, and lastly a hotel front desk clerk. Nan and his family work long hours and live frugally. In the restaurant he owns, they regularly work for fourteen hours a day, his and his wife's legs would be bloated, sour-smelling, and stiff by the time they get home.

After about eight years of toil and sweat, the Wu family finally becomes financially secure. They have a restaurant business and pay off the mortgage on a house they now own. After the last mortgage payment, Nan reasons, "This is freedom, not owing anybody a penny and having no fear of being fired" (418). His former employer Heidi Masefield, for whom they use to

housesit and cook, tells Pingping upon seeing the Wu family's house in Georgia, "This can happen only in America. I'm very moved by the fact that you and Nan have actualized your American dream so quickly. I'm proud of this country" (390). The Wu family's economic upward mobility and Masefield's words testify to the popular myth of the American dream: America is a land of plenty and boundless opportunities.

Being free from past socialist constraints in China and being upwardly mobile in economic terms in the United States doesn't necessarily mean freedom in the United States is a given promise. Does economic freedom suffice to fulfill the desire of Nan and his immigrant family's social and cultural acceptance? What free choice does Nan have as an immigrant socially and culturally? Can he and his family find belonging in America? America's racist past and the racial tension in the present, as well as the stigma of being an immigrant, continue to dictate the struggle of Nan's life as a new Chinese immigrant in the United States. Throughout the book, there are several incidents that focalize racial tension and struggle as a Chinese immigrant against the stronghold of WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) ideology, white supremacy, and nativist mentality.

Nan is first introduced to the concept of “race” in America by Tim, his black Canadian colleague, who works as a security guard for a condominium and talks with Nan about his “pigmentation” and how blacks are mistreated in the United States. The racial category of “colored” baffles him. Nan ponders, “Wasn’t white also a color? Why were whites viewed as colorless? Logically speaking, everybody should be ‘colored’” (65). Nan demonstrates naiveté as a new immigrant, ignorant of American’s racial history and racial hierarchy. He is even less aware of the early Chinese experience in America during the Exclusion era, when Chinese immigrant life was defined by exclusion, legally, institutionally, socially, and culturally.

As an Asian male, Nan is also “exoticized” in the popular imagination. On one of his midnight watches, he goes out to buy food and on his way to the parking lot, a drunken white couple stops him, urging him to join their orgy just because they have never had an Oriental man there. After Nan's refusal, they chase his car. In a panic, Nan locks himself in the factory and questions himself, “Why were they so determined to hurt him? Just because his face is yellow, not as white as theirs? How come they thought he'd like to take part in their monkey business?” (33). Nan is correct in associating the incident with racial connotations. What's more, as an Asian

male, his sexuality has always been questioned. Often, he is emasculated and regarded as effeminate or asexual. Other times, he will be viewed as overly sexualized, exotic, and sexually available.

The symbolic castration happened earlier when Nan was asked to take a physical to get the night watchman job at the factory. At the end of the checkup, "To Nan's astonishment, the doctor grabbed his testicles, rubbed them in his palm for three or four seconds, then squeezed them hard and yanked them twice. A numbing pain radiated through Nan's abdomen and made him almost cry out" (26). Nan "felt insulted but he didn't know what to do" (27). He contemplates whether he should ask about the procedure to figure out whether he has been wrongly treated. However, he turns the thought around and hushes himself by saying to himself, "never argue with a doctor," because the most important thing is to get the job.

Because Nan lacks medical knowledge of English words, he feels powerless to argue against anything. The doctor represents an authority figure, so he has to accept his words (or action). Symbolically, the doctor's behavior can be read as a form of castration, which speaks about Nan's inability to argue. His life as an immigrant is often conditioned on his incompetence

and disability, as argued earlier, in linguistic terms. This scene calls to the mind the Chinese immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century, passing through immigration and customs at Angel Island, San Francisco, which mainly served immigration from Asian countries. Before being admitted, the immigrants had to be stripped and undergo a vigorous physical exam to prove that they were healthy and carried no contagious disease. The discriminatory and differentiating treatment of Asian immigrants continues its covert practice in some places in contemporary American society.

Another pivotal moment occurs when an off-duty cop stops Nan because his car touched the police officer's car without him even being conscious of it. The police stopped him:

“You're lucky today. If you don't' stop next time, I'm gonna shoot you.”

Seized by a sudden surge of heartsickness and self-pity, Nan begged, “Why don't you do it now? Keel me, please!”

“I can do that if I like.” The officer kept writing without raising his eyes.

“Come on, awfficer, pull out your gahn and finish me off here. I'm sick of zis miserable life. Please shoot me!”

His earnestness surprised the man, who looked him in the face and muttered,

“You’re nuts!” Then he went on in an official tone of voice, “Stop bluffing! I’ve seen lots of wackos like you who don’t give a damn about others’ property.”

At this point, Taotao came over and stood by his father. The officer handed the driver's license back to Nan and said, "This is revoked. You can't drive anymore.

You're in deep shit."

“Why not keel me instead? Come on, put me out of this suffering! I’m sick of zis uncertain life. Please fire your gahn!” Nan gulped back tears, his face twisted with pain. (135-136)

His confrontation with the police and the intimidation of a white police triggers days of unrest and fear. Nan is afraid of not being able to drive again, which is considered a lifeline for his restaurant business and his daily life. Having nowhere to seek help, he calls a radio program asking for advice, and the radio host tells him that an off-duty police officer has no right to write tickets or to revoke his driver’s license. As an immigrant, Nan has to navigate unfamiliar rules and regulations. His life is conditioned by these limitations, just like his inability to understand

medical terms. It is a daily challenge to confront people, particularly those with authority, who may harbor racial discrimination or stereotypes about Asians and, in Nan's case, an immigrant, whose accent in English easily betrays him.

As Nan's experience in America grows, his understanding of “freedom” in the United States develops and becomes complicated, layered, and nuanced. In the context of immigration history, Nan expounds on how his “Chineseness” has been affected by the social construction of race and ethnicity in the United States that continues to bar him from being accepted and recognized socially as “American.” One day, after Nan has become a successful Chinese restaurant owner, homeowner, and a naturalized American, he realizes, in conversation with his neighbor, how pervasive implicit racial discrimination is in American society. When Nan's next-door neighbor has been evicted due to negligence and inability to pay the mortgage, Nan suggests to another neighbor, Alan, that a Chinese friend may be interested in buying the house.

Alan expresses his racist attitude:

“Well, tell him he's not welcome.” Alan's tone was rather casual, but he seemed to speak accidentally on purpose.

Nan was taken back. "Why?"

"I like you and Pingping, to be frank, and you're good neighbors. But there are too many Chinese in this neighborhood already. We need diversity, don't we?"

"But we are probably zee only Chinese here."

"How about the big family across the lake?"

"Oh, they're Vietnamese," Nan remembered seeing seven or eight cars parked in the yard of that brick raised ranch the other day. He had also noticed two young Asian couples in this area, but he was sure they weren't Chinese.

Alan continued, "Mrs. Lodge, Fred, Terry, and Nate, we all talked about this. We don't want this subdivision to become a Chinatown." (411)

Nan finds himself "scandalized" and doesn't know how to respond. The conflation of diverse sub-groups of Asian is also troubling. The Asians are lumped together without respect given toward their specific cultural and ethnic differences and identity. The erasure of differences has been constructed as an antithesis to the homogeneity of whiteness. The fear of another "Chinatown" echoes the history of racial segregation of place and space in early Chinese

immigration history. The existence of Chinatown as an ethnic enclave is marked by racial exclusion and antagonism. And even more, astonishing in the conversation is with Chinese being a token ethnicity represented in the neighborhood. He realizes "some people in the neighborhood had taken his family to be interlopers all along and probably would continue to do so whether they were naturalized or not" (411). Nan's naiveté about America being a melting pot is immediately challenged. His naturalized status still won't make a difference in how the white majority living in the neighborhood thinks about him as a Chinese, an immigrant, but not part and parcel of America.

All these incidents are indicative that freedom in American is conditional, with Chinese racially defined as "colored" and culturally marked as different and foreign. The contemporary Chinese immigrant experience invokes the memory of Chinese immigrant history in the United States. There are still traces of racist and discriminatory treatment of Chinese, and by extension Asian, in the today's the United States that are reminiscent of America's racist past. Chinese is the first ethnicity in American history targeted for being barred from entering the United States because they were deemed undesirable, inassimilable, and un-American by the 1882 Chinese

Exclusion Act. They were denied rights of citizenship and naturalization because they were not white and not native-born. Early Chinese immigrants are also gendered because of the "feminized" jobs they held. Chinatowns became the bachelor society's only place of ethnic survival; they were forced to retreat economically and residentially, from the general mainstream of America society because of racism, segregation, and exclusionist views. To early Chinese immigrants, freedom is limited, and their American dream is forever deferred. Though the racism, bigotry, and insidious racist attitudes are more implicit, the experiences of today's Asian immigrant astonishingly resemble the past. The ghost of the past wanders to the present. Because of the institutional and legal racism of the past, incidents such as Nan experienced with the police officer and medical examiner are perceived as antagonistic to the immigrant community. Any encounter with an authority or law enforcement figure triggers fear and anxiety.

As I argued elsewhere, the most important aspect of freedom that Nan is hungry for is creative freedom, the freedom of speech and expression that is denied to his countrymen. It motivates him to decide to write poetry in English finally. Throughout the novel, Nan attempts to carve a space in the American literary scene as an immigrant writer. Initially, he finds a role in

translating the texts of diasporic Chinese published in literary magazines. But soon he finds his English poems are being rejected over and over again, and his literary ambition is crushed. The moment of recognition arrives when he discovers a place that lacks immigrant literary voices and presence such as his. In New York, he visits a Museum of Chinese Immigrant Culture, where there are hundreds of miniature origami birds and written works by Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, and Gish Jen. The whole show was a letdown to Nan. When questioning why there have not been any great immigrant artists, Nan reflects:

Why do they call that place a cultural museum? Why are there so few exhibits that can be called artwork? 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? Maybe so, because the early immigrants were impoverished and many were illiterate, and because they all had to slave away to feed themselves and their families, and had to concentrate their energy on settling down in this unfamiliar, discriminatory, fearsome land. Just uprooting from their native soil must have crippled their lives and drained their vitality, not to mention

their creativity. How could it be possible for an unfettered genius to rise from a tribe of coolies who were frightened, exhausted, mistreated, wretched, and possessed by the instinct for survival? Without leisure, how can art thrive? (108)

As a museum for immigrants, the lack of presentation of authentic voice works, and literary and artistic production from immigrants is glaring. Nan identifies himself as an immigrant and connects with earlier Chinese immigrants, who share similar experiences with him. He strongly resents the absence of a literati class among first-generation immigrants, for which he blames economic hardship, family responsibility, and language barriers that prevent immigrants from pursuing and succeeding in creative endeavors. At the center of the immigrant experience are their material and linguistic struggles; for most of them, learning the English language is a way to strive for economic and social mobility, not a means for a literary endeavor. Writing in English seems to an immigrant a distant dream. Nan finds himself rejected at the hands of publishers repeatedly, and he regards this as a form of cultural exclusion for self-representation. Therefore, the immigrant experience is often represented by their second-generation, American-born children, as in the examples of Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, and Gish Jen's case, all

daughters of immigrant parents. Nan may fail to recognize his gender bias here. Instead of identifying with the Asian American women authors that are on display in the museum, he calls for Picasso, Faulkner, and Mozart, the white male artist, writer, and musician, respectively. Nan attempts to get into the recognized literati tradition, which is seemingly defined by Caucasian males. In his entire artistic endeavor, he finds the missing gap of the voice of immigrants like him. Nan identifies the need for Chinese diasporic authors to write in English to make their work accessible to the American readership and to be put on display on the museum shelf.

The immigrants' absence from the museum display shows the un-narrated story of the immigrant generation. The idea of immigrants sacrificing their labor for their future generations to have more choice is a long-standing practice in the immigrant community. Nan struggles between brawl and brain. Working at hard labor to support his family, and therefore being a responsible father and husband, conflicts with his inspiration to be a poet. Years of toil, sweat, and hard labor dull his mind. He often complains of his lack of time and energy to focus on study and writing poems. Yet the sheer material security for the first-generation immigrant is not enough for Nan. He tries to defy the odds. Nan's dream of the immigrant as a poet is also a

defiant stance against the popular American dream rhetoric, which mainly relies on materialistic sense and denies the first-generation immigrant access to cultural capital and production.

In the novel, Jin offers a critique of the materialistic America dream. Nan ponders early in the narrative that in the United States people are "obsessed with the illusion of getting rich" (66). "In this place, if you didn't make money, you were a loser, nobody. Your worth is measured by the property you owned and by the amount you had in the bank" (66). "Money, money, money—money was God in this place" (66). After he paid off his mortgage, Nan could not stand for his life as a worm, and could not help fulminating mentally, "You've been living like a worm and existed only in the flesh. You are just a channel of food, a walking corpse" (419). He wants to have a life of his own, not for his son or anybody else, but a life with intellectual stimulus and satisfaction. Close to the end of the narrative, Nan all of a sudden has a psychotic breakdown in the restaurant. Nan remembered his stifled dream to be a poet when a strong sense of self-hatred and self-loathing grabbed him.

How he hated himself! He had wasted so many years and avoided what he really

desired to do, inventing all kinds of excuses—his sacrifice for his son, his effort to

pay off the mortgage, his pursuit of the American dream, his insufficient command of English, his family's need for financial security, the expected arrival of a daughter, and the absence of an ideal woman in his life. The more he thought about his real situation, the more he loathed himself, especially for his devotion to making money, which had consumed so many of his prime years and dissolved his will to follow his own heart (605).

He then starts to burn money in the restaurant as a gesture of hatred for the materialistic existence this American life affords him. The existential crisis is triggered by his long overdue spiritual and literary transcendence that he so desperately needs in the form of poetic creation. And yet, as an immigrant, he is delayed because of his responsibility of providing for his family. His fits of madness mark him as an increasingly tragic character. Against the backdrop in which mainstream society defines the American dream in wealth and privilege, Nan is represented as only inching toward his dream of becoming a poet.

Bettina Hoffmann argues that Ha Jin makes a significant motif in this use of the *kunstlerroman*—or maturation of an artist¹⁹ (200). In other words, Ha Jin captures the development of Nan’s introduction to American society in parallel with Nan’s development as an artist. The narrative of *kunstlerroman* also defies economic mobility as the only purpose that American freedom affords. Nan looks for a literary or cultural belonging in America. Nan's choice to write in English, including his constant use of English allusion, literary aphorism, and quotations, poetic references, indicates his literary ambition is leaning toward English literary tradition, influence, and inspiration. As discussed earlier, for Nan, writing in English also shows a fundamental choice in choosing freedom of speech and expression, regardless of the costs, insecurity, and sacrifices he has to make. In Nan's stance on intellectual freedom, being an individual artist is seen as a holy and sacred mission, fulfillment of which defines his existence. To this extent, he exists in his art. His poetry is what represents who he is culturally, spiritually, and intellectually. In the transcendental power of poetry, Nan is able to see beyond patriotic

¹⁹ See Bettina Hofmann, “Ha Jin’s *A Free Life*: Revisiting the Kuenstlerroman.” *Moving Migration: Narrative Transformations in Asian American Literature*. Ed. Johanna C. Kardux and Doris Einsiedel. Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2010. 199-212.

Chineseness embedded in politics and cultural beliefs to humanism and universalism symbolized by poetry. Only in poetry, like religion, does Nan find salvation and transcendence from mundane life, and a higher calling for an intellectually satisfying artistic life. That's where he finds his freedom.

In conclusion, Ha Jin wanted to “write a piece of literature that could capture the metaphysical dimension of the immigrant experience” (M. Zhang 33). At the end of the novel, after the Wus have sold their restaurant, Nan works at a motel front desk for insurance benefits and to free his time to write poetry. Ha Jin consciously appends Nan's poetry collection, a total of twenty-four poems, to the end of the book. The last poem, “Another Country,” begins “You must go to a country without borders where you can build your home out of gallons of words” (660). The ending of the novel positions both “home” and “words” as the conciliation of Nan's immigrant experience. The ending indicates Nan is resorting to art as a way of ultimate reconciliation and transcendence. These poems, as an appendage to the main narrative, pose an ambiguous reading of whether Nan succeeds in being an English poet in America. We don't know if those poems are published or not. In leaving this to the reader's guess, Ha Jin presents a

critical view of what the American dream is supposed to symbolize for immigrants. As Nan looks back on his experiences and accomplishments to reassess what the American dream means, Nan realizes that "The notion of the American dream had bewildered him for a good decade; now he knew that to him, such a dream was not something to be realized but something to be pursued only" (619).

3.2 Visuality, Sexuality, and Gendered Chineseness: Geling Yan's *The Lost Daughter of Happiness* (2001)

The Lost Daughter of Happiness, first published as *Fusang*²⁰ in Chinese in 1995 in Taiwan, was translated into English in 2001.²¹ In the novel, Yan creates the story of the title character Fusang, a historical figure, who is mentioned in various histories of Chinese immigration to San Francisco in the 1860s and 1870s. The novel narrates the story of Fusang and

²⁰ The name Fusang carries multiple meanings. In the book "Fusang: The Chinese Who Built America," Stan Steiner explains the myth of Fusang, discovered by several Buddhist missionaries, who in the fifth century embarked on a voyage and landed on the shores of America by mistake. Fusang is the archaic name for America. Fusang is the name of an early immigrant woman in Geling Yan's novel, which speaks about the imagining and desire for America in the 1860s and 1870s. It establishes an earlier presence of Chinese in America, and thus a relationship to this land. It also squarely situated Fusang in America, as an American.

²¹ The Chinese novel was first published in Taiwan by Linking Publishing House 台湾联经出版公司 on August 1, 1996, and was awarded Best Novel in United Daily News Literary Contest 1995 获第九届 1995 年“联合报文学奖”长篇小说奖. It was published in English translation by Hyperion Books (U.S.) and Faber and Faber (U.K.) in 2001 and made the *Los Angeles Times* top ten best-seller list for a week in 2002. In her early writing career after relocating to the United States, Yan wrote and regularly published in Taiwan. The themes of her early short stories such as “The Landlady, (女房东)” (1993) (First Prize, Central Daily News Literary Contest for Short Story), “Red Silk Dress (红罗裙)” (1994) (Critics’ Prize from China Times), “Across the Ocean” (海那边),” (1994) (First Prize, United Daily News) are drawn from mainland Chinese immigrant experience in the United States. Early Taiwan immigrant literature in the 1970s and 1980s has paved the way for a receptive market for the new immigrant experience from mainland China. This circular way of transnational publication first in Taiwan, then in the United States, and eventually in mainland China is an interesting phenomenon considering readership, marketing, and language.

her relationship with two men: Chris, an American boy of German descent eight years younger than her; and Da Yong, a Chinese immigrant of many illegal trades who turns out to be Fusang's absent husband. Born mentally retarded in China, Fusang is married at fourteen to an absent husband, who has been in America seeking his fortune. After her marriage, she serves as a maid to her in-laws, who cherish her for her ignorance, since her retardation makes it easier to exploit her. Not long into her marriage, she is abducted and sold to a brothel in San Francisco. She becomes an attractive sex object, satisfying the curiosity of European American boys and the biological needs of Chinese men, who are legally prohibited from bringing their Chinese wives to America.

Her physical maturity and exoticism attract the attention of Chris, then twelve, whose admiration for her exotic beauty soon turns into love. He begins to pursue her steadfastly wherever she is sold. When he finds Fusang being left in a dark room to die with tuberculosis, he rescues her with the help of the Christian Rescue Society. However, the Rescue Society incarcerates her to reform her. In an accelerated racial tension against Chinese, particularly hatred targeted at the vice of Chinese prostitution, Fusang was gang-raped in the Chinatown

racial riots in the 1870s, and Chris participated in raping her. In the end, Da Yong, converted by Fusang's benevolence and disillusioned about future life in the United States, decides to free her. In his farewell entertainment of Fusang at a theater, Da Yong kills a white businessman who protests that Fusang's presence humiliates his wife and daughter. Da Yong is arrested and sentenced to death. On the execution day, Fusang leaves Chris behind and drives to the execution ground where she holds a wedding ceremony with Da Yong, who is, in fact, her original husband. After accompanying Da Yong's cinerary casket back to China, she returns to the United States and stays there until death.

Fusang is a composite image of early Chinese immigrant women, regarded both as an individual but also a symbol of her generation and her community. Fusang's experience touches on lives of a whole generation of 3,000 Chinese prostitutes who are the majority of the early Chinese immigrant women who lived in San Francisco Chinatown in the period of the 1860s and 1870s. In the 1860s and 1870s, the anti-Chinese sentiment was high, and America was defining its national identity with the expansion of the frontier to the West. On the Western frontier, particularly in San Francisco Chinatown, there was growing anti-Chinese sentiment because of

labor competition and economic recession. The Page Law in 1875 targets the “lewd or immoral purposes” of Chinese contract labor, and Chinese women specifically. Chinese women were demonized as “disease-carrying prostitutes” and used as political scapegoats to wage political campaigns and legislation limiting, restricting and barring Chinese immigrants. In the historian Erika Lee’s words, the law “represented the country’s first—albeit limited—regulation of immigration on the federal level and served as an important step toward general Chinese exclusion” (24). Eventually, the federal legislature followed with the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which lasted for six decades and specifically excluded Chinese from immigrating to the United States. It became the first act in U.S history that targeted a particular ethnic and racial minority group.

Ideologies of racial superiority underwrite the racialized discourse of inclusion and exclusion. Deborah L. Madsen writes in *Sexing the Sojourner* that “Chinese immigrant women, many of whom were subjected to sexual servitude in frontier mining towns and growing coastal cities, made possible the permanent settling of the West by European American families,

families that would reproduce as white Anglo-American ‘nationalized’ bodies” (36).²² Chinese prostitutes facilitated the bachelor lifestyle of the Chinese men who were to build the infrastructure of the American West. Exclusionary legal acts restricted the entry of Chinese women and therefore inhibited the formation of the Chinese family in the United States.

In this chapter, I exam visibility, sexuality, and Yan’s narrative strategy to discuss how the text interrogates visual politics and the over-determination of race and gender contradictions in the formation of Chinese immigrant women identities, identities that are based on a recognition of difference and exclusion. I read the text as a process to articulate the epistemic violence of seeing and of the white male gaze, and to theorize Chineseness within feminist parameters. I argue that instead of portraying Fusang as a victimized sex object, Yan focuses on visibility and sexuality as a discourse of resistance toward Orientalist and patriarchal construction of early Chinese immigrant women. Yan first resurrects Fusang’s image from the erasure of history and then gives her power to gaze back toward her male gazers. Yan insists on making Fusang visible to conceptualize the relations between identity and sexuality, race and ethnicity,

²² Madsen, Deborah Lea. "Sexing the Sojourner: Imagining Nation: Writing Women in the Global Chinese Diaspora." *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 1(2): 36-49, 2008.

body and politics. Secondly, Fusang's open and boundless sexuality elevates her to the image of an earth mother goddess figure. It mythologizes the early Chinese immigrant women's pioneering spirit and survival strategy. Thirdly, as formal experimentation, Yan creates in the story a contemporary immigrant woman as a narrator. It is via her voice we piece together Fusang's life and are led to historic Chinatown, to the time and place where the racial tension between white and Chinese is at its peak. The structure facilitates conversation between generations of immigrant women; provides an understanding of Chinese American history; and offers empowerment, healing, strength, and knowledge for the future generations of woman immigrants. The juxtaposition of the historical and contemporary immigrant women's experience provides a comparison between how "Chineseness" is prescribed then and how it changes at present. In doing so, Yan expands her vision, transcending life on the margins to grasp the tension and meaning of Chineseness in flux, with its transnational, trans-historical, and trans-generation complexities.

3.2.1. Visuality: Gaze and Oppositional Gaze²³

²³ See bell hooks' 1992 essay "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectatorship." And for more, see bell hooks' book *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*.

The invisibility of early Chinese immigrant women, who suffered from the dual domination of patriarchy and racism, can be attributed to the history that often erased their existence. Early Chinese immigrant women's history is a history of continual efforts fighting against erasure, exclusion, and oppression. The contemporary narrator, who self-identifies as a fifth-generation immigrant from China, tasks herself to discover Fusang through historical archives, in "one hundred and sixty cake-dusted books" (155). The first and foremost task of the narrator is to resurrect the image of Fusang from the dust of history. The novel starts at the auction house,

This is WHO YOU ARE.

The one dressed in red, slowly rising from the creaking bamboo bed, is you. The embroidery on your satin padded jacket must weigh ten catties; the parts stitched most densely are as hard as ice, or armor. From a distance of one hundred and twenty years, I'm amazed by the needlework, so thoroughly beyond me...

Now turn around, just like all those times on the auction block. You're used to the auction; that's where pretty whores like you come to know their worth. I found

pictures of those auctions in some books about Chinatown—dozens of female bodies, totally naked, their beauty in sharp relief against the surrounding gloom.

(1)

Yan starts the novel with first and foremost the mission to resurrect images of Fusang from these history books. In the opening scene, much attention has been paid to the description of details of Fusang's cloth and needlework and makes sure we can see the color red and feels the intricate patterns of the embroidery. The color red takes an extra layer of symbolic meaning in the later story. The metaphor of "ice" for cloth indicates the cold, unfeeling nature of the cloth and "armor" points to the cloth as a self-protective shell, no matter how vulnerable this layer can be to the outside world and Fusang's physical body. It creates a distance between the exterior of what Fusang wears and the interiority of Fusang as a person.

Auction blocks are where Chinese prostitutes were stripped naked when they came ashore in San Francisco and were exposed to buyers for a visual assessment of their value. The act of stripping them naked, with full exposure, further indicates the women's' vulnerability, their powerlessness. As Fusang stands in view of those auctioning her and buying her, Yan is also

auctioning her, transcending a historical span of one hundred and twenty years, through the narrator to us, the reader. The locale of the auction block epitomizes women as objects and commodities by marketing them for monetary value in exchange for food and shelter. To further dehumanize them, they were sold by weight together with tea and other cargos. Putting a price tag on their bodies further negates their humanity and denies their subjectivity.

At the beginning of the auction market, Yan also draws the reader's attention to Fusang's bound feet, "less than four inches long: two mummified magnolia buds," described as "a vestige of antiquity on a real live body" (2). "In the deformity and decay of those feet, they could read the Orient" (2). When Fusang is sold the second time by an amah, to increase her sale value, she "pulled off one of Fusang's shoes" and "walked the crowd with it displayed in her palm," saying, "These genuine four-inch golden lotuses are really three-point-eight" (25).

Fusang's bound feet are a physical difference, as well as a physical deformity that partially reflects the backwardness of China's patriarchal cultural practices exerted upon women and womanhood. "Bound feet" are a symbol of a genteel woman's conformity to what Confucianism prescribed to Chinese women at the time: "three obediences," that is, obedience to

father as a daughter, obedience to her husband when married, and obedience to her son when widowed. These central tenets of Confucian teaching confine women to a limited role and highly subordinate position in all social relations and, therefore, restrain their physical, mental, and intellectual development and expression of personhood and subjectivity. The bound feet become a symbol of restricted womanhood in imperial China.²⁴ Women with bound feet are supposed to be cloistered at home, not venture out of their homes, and are even less able to be physically active in sports or doing any arduous labor. They are expected to stay in the inner quarter of their homes and live a sheltered but limited domesticated life.

On a symbolic level, foot binding—a cultural practice to restrain Fusang’s physical ability, resulting in her deformed physicality—corresponds to her slowness of the mind, a mental and intellectual disability. Her restricted capacity often puts her in a position with limited external voice and no inner voice. Limited English and little freedom further subjugate her in an often voiceless and powerless position, marginalizing her as an immigrant subject. Confucianism and American imperialism dually enforce her subjugation. Her retardation also is indicative of

²⁴ The practice was heavily criticized and abolished at the turn of the twentieth century.

physical bondage as a woman in China. As a prostitute in San Francisco Chinatown, the narrow space of the brothel, where she is kept in a prison-like cell, limits her activities to entertaining her customers. As a feminist scholar, Tani Barlow argues that “the lack of voice, sexual differences from men lead to ‘notion of female passivity, biological inferiority, intellectual inability, organic sexuality, and social absence’” (*Gender Politics* 264). Yan attempts to have Fusang embody physical immobility and intellectual inability that reversely affect her ability to speak and represent herself.

Chris is a twelve-year-old white boy, who like two thousand other white boys between the ages of eight and fourteen entertained themselves with Chinese prostitutes for a “cheap thrill,” spending their “lunch money or candy allowance” on Chinese whores (16). When Chris walks into Fusang’s place for the very first time, he is fascinated by what he sees. The mysterious quality, which he categorizes as “Oriental,” enchants him. He finds everything alluring from the “furnishing of the room” (11) to the comportment of Fusang’s every movement. “He just stared. He could not figure out what made her movements so tempting—such a new and different temptation” (11-12). To Chris, Fusang’s jewels, earrings, bracelets, necklace, and hairpins bring

to mind “all the mysteries of the Orient and the ornate intricacies of antiques” (12). Even the “dirtiest English words” Fusang says “with complete sincerity.” “The heart behind the words was so innocent that each syllable became something entirely unfamiliar.” “The effect was enchanting” (13). A strong Chinese accent is indicative of the prostitutes’ foreign origin, and the sexually charged and explicit language is accentuated on their performativity of Chineseness in a linguistic and gendered way.

In the 1860s and 1870s, in America, Chineseness was first perceived through exterior visual images. Therefore, visibly different physical traits, such as men with queues and women with bound feet, were the first to be brought to the attention of the viewer and often were often associated in American public imagination as “Chineseness.” Then Chris’s gaze moved to the physical feature of Fusang’s “bound feet,” and he “couldn’t believe they were real.” He moved closer to them. In front of the “bound feet” of Fusang, Chris “knelt beside the bed and reached out and touched them,” and he could not help but appreciate the “sensitive,” “vulnerable,” “fishtail” feet (25). Quite unusually, the image of “kneeling” is iconic and appeared multiple times in the text, which I will elaborate on later.

Catherine MacKinnon argues that "woman through male eyes is a sex object, that by which man knows himself at once a man and as a subject" (538), and in Chris's masculine gaze, he objectifies Fusang. In addition, in this initial meeting scene between Fusang and Chris, Chris also performs a typical Orientalist gaze. Edward Said characterizes Orientalism as a "European invention," and one of Europe's "deepest and most recurring images of the Other" (1). Said posits that Orientalism operates as disciplinary practice "for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (3).

In Chris's gaze of the other, the outlandish dress, the Oriental ornaments form the construction of white representations of Chineseness. Inscribed on prostitutes' bodies are images of an "Orient." His later obsession with Fusang, the Oriental woman, and all his failed attempts to understand her, even eventually becoming a Chinese historian, play well into Said's Orientalism. As a system of knowledge, Orientalism is regarded as a colonizing power that reproduces and maintains white supremacy. Similarly, Chineseness regarded as the object of

spectacle and gaze, is both an exotic pleasure and an alien threat. The younger Chris's erotic gaze puts Fusang through a process of objectification, turning her into the desired object. In his years of coming of age, from adolescence to adulthood—that is, ages twelve to seventeen—he will keep resorting to this cultural other to confirm his own identity and masculinity by perpetuating his fascination and desire toward the Orient.

The general fascination and fixation over “bound feet” also indicate the general American public's knowledge of China and Chinese womanhood. The initial contact and exposure of Americans to Chinese women is through Afong Moy's exhibition of herself in the 1830s and 1840s. It sparked great public interest about China and the Chinese woman in particular. Afong Moy was the first Chinese woman to travel to the United States, brought to the country in 1834 as part of a theater troupe. Exhibitions called attention to her “bound feet.” “To Americans,” according to historian Tao Zhang, “the practice of foot-binding distanced China from civilized America, where ‘the countenances of uncrippled females are full of vivacity,’ displaying a sharp contrast of a Chinese beauty ‘always void of animation and somewhat expressive of the suffering

which her ligatured feet may produce” (490).²⁵ The general public sympathized with her experiences but readily pointed out the bizarre thinking behind bound feet and how unreasonable the practice was. Americans viewed the practice as “foreign,” “uncivilized,” “cruel,” and “victimized,” in contrast with their own more healthy, lively American womanhood. In this perception, they reductively understood Chinese womanhood and the image of bound feet as serving functions solely to reaffirm and reinscribe patriarchy. This interpretation and concept of the Chinese woman erase the difference between women in specific socio-economic, national, and cultural contexts, of women defined precisely as historical subjects.

“Gazing” becomes an important tool to replace “voice” to focus on the visual, the process of seeing and being seen and the power dynamic of subject and object position. Chris’s interests in visual images develop young. When Chris was a little boy, he liked looking at unusual things with the mirror, such as “baby foxes suckling, the cook picking her nose while a hired man stuck his hand up her skirt, birds kissing, the feet of his siblings and cousins kicking each other under the dining room table. In this mirror, he had even seen his aunt give birth to his youngest girl

²⁵ More on Afong Moy, please see Tao Zhang’s “The Start of American Accommodation of the Chinese: Afong Moy’s Experience from 1834 to 1850.” *Journal of American Studies* 49.3 (2015): 475-503.

cousin” (114). He continues in adulthood to perform the act of “gazing” as his way of knowing the world and understanding the relationship between himself and others and him and the world. Before he comes to meet Fusang, “he used a little round mirror to savor every part of her. He had learned as a child to use this mirror to capture any scene in the world as his own, however momentary, private possession” (10). The mirror in his possession often becomes his tool. The mirror/gaze is his epistemological tool to see the hidden desire, the ugly secret, and the illicit sexual impulses. The tool is empowering the child’s imagination yet limiting in how images can, and to what extent do, reflect reality and reveal the truth. Fundamentally, how much he can know and how reliable his knowledge is a call for questioning.

As the relationship between Chris and Fusang evolves, Chris’s gaze shifts between an Orientalist’s gaze, a white masculine gaze, and rescuer’s gaze. Chris’s fascination and infatuation quickly accelerate to male desire and fantasy of rescue. The range of “gazes” reflect the Orientalist discourses in the mid-nineteenth century the U.S. In Chris’s perspective, Fusang represents a hypersexualized Oriental woman that needs to be comprehended (in Said’s unequal relation between the self and the other) dominated and rescued. After his initial encounter with

Fusang at the age of twelve, he feels taller in his dreams and imagines himself as “a knight of courage and passion” brandishing a long sword because an “Oriental princess imprisoned in a dark cell waits for him to rescue” (19). At the age of fourteen, Chris stands at the window surveying the scene when Fusang takes men into her room. Fusang’s sexually generous attitude touches him and moves him to tears, and “intoxicated with his own chivalry” (67), he walks in after the tenth man climbed off her body. He says that he has ten dollars and he can keep her for the night. The third time they meet, Fusang is infected with tuberculosis and has been left at a so-called Chinese hospital to die. Chris holds his “little mirror” to a crack in the door and sees Fusang in the room. He later reports to the journalist about the awful condition of the Chinese “hospital” that left their dying patient without care. “When he used the word *rescue*, the expression on his face was adorable, because it took him back to the adventure stories of his childhood” (emphasis original 127).

Though constricted by her difficult physical circumstances, and voiceless and powerless, each time Chris gazes, Fusang gazes back. When Yan resurrects Fusang from history, she gives her humanity and subjectivity, though Fusang has been stripped of the power of speaking.

Instead, Yan gives her the power of gazing back toward the power that tries to objectify her. In Chris's gaze, each time Fusang refuses Chris's rescue or rejects his savior's logic, and she consequently refuses to be objectified as a passive, extremely feminine, and sexualized Chinese prostitute. At the age of fourteen, Chris sees Fusang in a teahouse after two years of searching, and he follows her to the brothel. Instead of walking in, he climbs up a tree and lands on Fusang's window, gazing at her making love with her customers through the window. She looks out in space. Her seeing and gaze transcend space, bypassing the window, and reach Chris. "By the time he found her eyes, they were already waiting for him" (62). While Chris gazes in through the window, "her gaze sent it toward Chris" (62). As she looks, she opens herself to him with her eyes and invites him in. She watches him enter and ushers him in (62). Instead of being gazed at as a passive sexual object, Fusang "invites" Chris and consummates an imagined sex act. More importantly, the "gazing" and "invitation" destroy Chris's imagining of Fusang being a sex slave and a victim in the senseless prostitution. The "gaze" here empowered the women's subjectivity bounded by their Chinese femaleness. The "invitation" disrupts conventional racist and sexist stereotypical representation of Chinese female bodies. The "gaze back" dismantles the

power structure of the gazed and the gazer. Through the gaze, Fusang “convince(s) him that suffering is part of your beauty, that you can rise from it again and again” (64).

According to her 1992 essay “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectatorship,” bell hooks argues that there has been a long history of repression for “our/black people’s right to gaze” which had produced in black people “an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze” (94). Therefore, she advocates for a black feminist “oppositional gaze,” a self-aware and self-reflective practice, as a gesture of resistance, challenges to authority, particularly male authority and white authority (94), because simply “there is power in looking” (94). To borrow her term, Chris’s white male’s gaze seeks to overpower and undermine Fusang and reinscribe on her female body a narrative of voyeuristic pleasure. The only allowed position for Fusang is as a victim. In the first scene of the voyeuristic peek at Fusang’s sex act, Fusang meets Chris’s desiring, objectifying, sexualized white male gaze with her oppositional gaze and takes power back. Suddenly the white male’s capacity to gaze, define, and know that begs our questions. She displays her body not for a voyeuristic gaze but for that look of recognition that

affirms her subjectivity. It reinstalls a counter-narrative of race, knowledge, and power. “How they see themselves is most important, not how they will be stared at by others” (bell hooks 94).

Fusang’s refusal to be rescued by Chris accompanies her rejection of the Christian Rescue Society’s Christian savior logic, of which Chris is a part. When the Christian Rescue Society held Fusang for recovery from tuberculosis, Da Yong comes to claim her by accusing Fusang of stealing from him. He hits her hard as a pretense to get her out of the rescue Society. It is a difficult decision: on the one hand, Da Yong represents the power of the patriarchy in Chinatown, and on the other is a demand by the Christian faith for her makeover. With her hands in chains and blood trickling down her face, Fusang admits that she is a thief. At the moment, she “look[s] right over all the commotion in the room,” sees Chris, and signals him with her eyes. Chris also notices Fusang looking at him. “The expression on her face was one of the total involvement as if she had no idea what everyone was fighting about. She licked a trickle of blood from her cheek with all the detachment of a bystander” (137).

When Fusang walks out of the Rescue Society, Chris is the only one sees her smile. Fusang’s smile of surprise and pity reveals her silence to be a powerful refusal to be lost in

someone else's definition and translation of self and experience. The young Chris could not comprehend Fusang's gaze and her nonchalant smile, but years later the older Chris realizes that Fusang will not be rescued, "Whether you set her free or enslaved her, her freedom came completely from within" (142). The detachment and the nonchalant smile, like her "armor," protect her inner self. Fusang's life has been full of painful physical suffering, first as bride and maid to the absent marriage and then as an involuntarily forced prostitute in a Chinatown, far removed from her home. While the extraordinary external conditions and her physical suffering reduce her to senseless prostitution, her freedom comes from internal strength and affirmation of her self.

As in the power play of "gazing" and "oppositional gaze," the colors "red" and "white" take up symbolic implications to underline the power relationship between "Americanness" and "Chineseness." These colors take a prominent place in Yan's emphasis on textual visibility. Red represents China and traditional Chinese culture and Chineseness as embodied by Fusang. She wears a red silk dress most of the time, and it melts into the Chinese brothel décor. The color "red" is how Chris recognizes her in her Chinese elements. In Chris's eye, Fusang's red satin is

the symbol of the cultural other and perpetual mystery. It also symbolizes sexual degradation, wantonness, and moral corruptness, and as charged by the respectable white missionary lady Mary, "The red thing you're wearing is a filthy sin" (125).

If red symbolically represents "Chineseness," an essential cultural, national, and individual identity Fusang claims for herself, then "whiteness" is represented by Chris, a white man, and by the Christian church, the cultural and religious institution. The color white symbolizes the white West, and for women, purity and chastity. When Fusang recuperates from tuberculosis at the Rescue Society, overwhelming "whiteness" symbolizes everything in it, as if everything is painted over by white color. The cloth Fusang wears is "white sackcloth," and the bed and room and even the building are white. When Chris sees Fusang in "white sackcloth," she loses her allure, and they become "strangers," and he finds his obsession is gone (128). Chris even refuses to recognize Fusang and agrees with the Christian lady Mary that he should not get close to this prostitute because the room is "so pure and white" that "it was sacred," (141). Keeping a distance from her seemed both proper and necessary (138). Sacred, propriety, and purity, are adjectives denied to Fusang, a Chinese prostitute in a red dress, but are imposed on

her when she is in “white sackcloth.” The overwhelming power of whiteness seeks to naturalize any alien elements. In the “sterile white room” a spider web is the only thing that stands out of this whiteness but “one day someone broke it with a broom, and the whiteness was whole once more” (123-124). The white building is “too clean to tolerate even the smallest spider web.”

Symbolically, it demands conformity and conversion on Fusang’s part to desert her “otherness” and assimilate, a negation of who she is. She quickly sees the resemblance between her and the spider, as the only thing that stands out in this pure and overwhelmingly white environment.

Just as she resisted being saved by Chris, Fusang refuses to be reformed and resists conforming to white America's Christian ideology and Victorian womanhood; she insists on being herself on her terms. She tenaciously believes that the red dress and the red dress alone would allow Chris to recognize the real her (125). "Chris was just like all men—the version of her they were drawn to was the red one " (138). She finds the red satin in the trash and puts it back on the next time Chris sees her, and "The solid crimson stuns him, and he felt all his senses shift." Seeing her afresh and anew, Chris feels that "She cut a swath of red through the suffocating whiteness. The red bled into the whiteness like ink on rice paper" (139). Only many

years later does Chris also realize that by putting on the red blouse Fusang "reclaim(ed) her true self" (138). This simple act of defiance foreshadows Fusang's later decision to leave on her own will with Da Yong when he came to claim her at the Christian Rescue Home.

Yan's textual visuality seizes control of stereotypical ways in which Chinese female subjects are comprehended. Instead of thinking it is Yan's failure because of Fusang's voicelessness, I would say it demonstrates her genius in the acknowledgment of inability to interpret, explain, or read the historical figure. Invoking Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's provocative assertion that "the subaltern cannot speak" (198), Yan seems to agree that a third world woman cannot simply speak because she is always already marked as not having the right to speak in history. Yan offers a visual representation that challenges stereotypical notions of Chineseness and Chinese femaleness and problematizes the question of "racial" identity by depicting visuality and oppositional gaze. Fusang's resistance exists "inside" the image, which also embodies her subjectivity. That explains the significance of Yan's emphasis on visuality instead of voice by staging and parodying Orientalism's politics of visuality.

3.2.2. Sexuality: Chinese Whore and Earth Mother Goddess

As Catherine A. MacKinnon points out, “sexuality is gendered; gender is sexualized (635)”²⁶. Gender, as socially constructed, embodies sexuality by maintaining a division of power that institutionalizes male sexual dominance and female sexual submission. The ethics of the patriarchal society demand that women yield their bodies up as sexual tools for men’s use, but also censure them if they themselves gain pleasure from such use. While forced into prostitution, Fusang has nothing to claim for her “self” but sexuality. In Yan’s narrative strategy, she regards sexuality as an important way to express female subjectivity. It is through the way Fusang expresses herself sexually that we start to peel through her exterior “armor” into her interior space. The subjectivity of Fusang is rendered visible by how bodies and interiority interplay thorough her repetitive sexual acts and expressiveness of her sexuality.

One of the most influential motivations of these anti-Chinese exclusion laws is the fear of miscegenation and Chinese sexuality. “Chinese sexuality” in the second half of nineteenth-century America is often viewed as abnormal, deviant, degenerate, and abhorrent. Political elites or labor agitators regularly characterized Chinese men as “evil with a strong sexual appetite.”

²⁶ Catharine A. MacKinnon. “Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: Towards Feminist Jurisprudence” *Signs*, 8(4): 635-658.

They threatened white womanhood and posed potential peril to the West. Chinese men threatened the sanctity or purity of “white” women. They generated fears of mixed-race offspring that would taint “white America” (Madsen 43). The anti-miscegenation law in California started to include Chinese and dictated that whites cannot marry “negro, mulatto, or Mongolian” (Takaki 102).

According to Takaki, “ [i]n 1852, of the 11,794 Chinese in California, only seven were women—a ratio of 1,685 males to every one female. Eight years later, of 63,199 Chinese in the United States, only 4,566 were female—a ration of fourteen to one....In the 1870 census manuscripts, 61 percent of the 3,536 Chinese women in California had occupations listed as ‘prostitute’”(121). In Chinatown, where the sex ratio was skewed, because men could not bring their wives, prostitutes and prostitution became a problem solver.

In the 1870s, politicians, intellectual elites, and moral reformers in California continued to rely on the public discourse that characterized the Chinese as morally degenerate, focusing the public’s attention on Chinese women’s sexual deviance in particular. The passing of the Page Law in 1875, a gender-based exclusion act, was intended to “screen out immigrants, especially

women, who were perceived to be immoral or guilty of sexual misdeeds” (Erika Lee 24-25). On the one hand, Chinese women were barred from entering for fear of their sexual immorality; on the other hand, the women in America already were disciplined for their sexuality by forces such as Christian society, to conform to Christian values. “The hostile assumption that Chinese women would inevitably work as prostitutes arose,” Madsen argues, “from these general anxieties about mixed-race sexual relations and the impact of inter-racial reproduction upon the future profile of the nation” (45).

Furthermore, in the definition of Christian Victorian womanhood, Fusang’s role as a prostitute violates the sexual norms that demanded sex be limited to the family. After Chris saves Fusang from the Chinese hospital and sends her to the Rescue Society, the Christian Rescue Society (historically Presbyterian Mission Home) also tries to convert Fusang and turn her into a respectful woman again, in particular by disciplining her sexuality. When Mary, the lady who works in the Mission Home, runs into a dubious scene where Chris is seen staying too close to Fusang, she accuses Fusang of being “a wild beast in red, Chris the prey lured to her maw” (140). She is viewed as a predator, with animalistic traits, luring and seducing a white boy into her maw.

In addition to her tuberculosis, the reason to “quarantine” her on the top floor of the white building is to keep her “from corrupting the girls who have already been reformed” (128). Seen as a disease, a pollutant, and a morally corrupted woman, Fusang supposedly will infect the other girls’ purity and chastity, damaging their newly established Christian faith.

In San Francisco Chinatown in the 1870s, perhaps the only possible means out of prostitution is through Christian conversion and conforming to Christianity, and this route offered one of the only chances to become a “good” woman again. According to research done by Hirata on the historical Mission Home, a significant number of prostitutes ran away and sought shelter in Mission Home to escape maltreatment, prostitution, enforced servitude, or bad marriages. Many prostitutes who were reformed eventually married good Christian Chinese men. There are also a large number of women were placed in white households as domestic servants. This option did provide a second chance for women in destitute conditions such as Fusang’s. However, the Mission Home’s efforts could also be moralizing and were premised on religious conversion. The flaw of the Mission Home’s efforts, according to historian Judy Yung, lay in their unyielding belief in “in the superiority of Victorian cultural values,” “to the point of self-

righteous condescension” and “rescued women were often pressured into adopting gender roles that emphasized female purity, piety, and Christian home life” (36).

Fundamentally, the Christians of the Mission Home were trying to reform these fallen Chinese women into exemplary good women, based on marriage and family, therefore raising them to the standards of nineteenth-century American Victorian womanhood, as good Christian wives and mothers. Fusang’s defiance marks her as different; in doing so, the novel magnifies its critique of white Christian ideology, morality, and hypocrisy. The skewed sex ratio between man and woman reached a high peak in 1870. In San Francisco Chinatown, the most substantial Chinese immigrant settlement, there were around 1400 Chinese prostitutes out of a female Chinese population of about 2000. Prostitution perpetuated Chinese sojourning abroad and supported the migrant labor system in America. According to sociologist Lucie Cheng Hirata, the importation of Chinese prostitutes met the Chinese men’s (and often European American men’s) sexual demands while limiting the perceived threat to “white” womanhood²⁷ (7). Benson Tong’s research of Chinese prostitutes in nineteenth-century America reveals that, by the 1860s,

²⁷ Lucie Cheng Hirata, “Free, Indentured, Enslaved: Chinese Prostitutes in Nineteen-Century America,” *Signs* (1979) 5.1: 3-29.

Chinese prostitutes in America “acquired the image of being immoral, foreign, feeble-minded, nymphomaniacal—and the principal source of venereal contagion”²⁸(130). The immoderation of Chinese women was threatening to white womanhood, the white family, and the future of the West.

On the one hand, this racialized logic relies on disciplining Chinese female sexuality and the Chinese female body through these exclusion acts and immigration policies; on the other hand, it also over-sexualizes Chinese femaleness, and spurs rampant growth and increases the profit margin of running a prostitution ring. Chinese prostitution started to grow exponentially because of the high profit and high demand that characterized the 1860s and 1870s in Chinatown. There was a whole network of female traffic rings in operation during the time. The Chinese in collaboration with the procurer, the people who accompanied these women ashore, the customs officers—all were in for lucrative gains. Many Chinese women entered into prostitution involuntarily, either by abduction or being sold by their families. Many of them lived difficult lives. Chinese prostitutes, therefore, should be seen as a social phenomenon coming out of the

²⁸ Benson Tong, *Unsubmissive Women: Chinese Prostitutes in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco*, Boulder, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 2003.

historical period of needs, opportunism, and exclusionist policies. Judy Young argues in her book *Unbound Feet*, “their lives were doubly bound by American and Chinese ideologies that emphasized the inferiority of the Chinese race and the subordination of women, on the one hand, and economic conditions that nurtured prostitution and the exploitation of female labor, on the other” (50).

Denied being a wife, Fusang becomes a wife to all. In China, she is a wife to an absent husband. She performs a virtuous wife as dictated by the Confucian gender code, with virtues of filial piety, loyalty, and chastity; she has no sexuality to speak of. Female sexuality is often "nonexpressive," and the female body is often hidden. Within Confucian Chinese culture, the female body is constantly disciplined and sexually repressed to sustain a gendered cultural identity. After forced immigration, Fusang becomes a prostitute, which in Chinese context means a "baijia fu 百家妇" or wife of a hundred men. Prostitutes occupy the lowest social status in the society, regarded as social deviants, filthy, morally degraded, but sexually alluring. Many males in the story compete in efforts to possess Fusang, few tries to comprehend her.

Sexuality becomes a form of power, through which Fusang expresses herself and claims herself. When Fusang provides service to the bachelor society, the men who visit her feel for the first time they are being treated equally. Her boundlessly open sexuality fascinates, baffles, and disorients the male characters in the novel. As I argued previously, Fusang in Chris's gaze is a racialized and sexualized image. Through the articulation of otherness, Chris constructs relations of racial supremacy and subordination. When Chris finds her the second time, he sees through the window how men make love to Fusang, "She wasn't resisting as he had expected, but accommodating herself completely to the man. The way the beach accommodates the tide" (62). Fusang obviously surprises Chris with her accommodating sexuality toward men. No struggling and suffering, but only beautiful "harmony," "Her body was its basis; she controlled the advance and retreat" (62). She seems to be enjoying the "basest" pleasure in the sexual acts. Fusang resists being turned into a sexual commodity. Fusang's at-homeness with forced sexual transactions sets her apart from familiar tropes of fallen women. The scene slowly suggests Fusang's all-accepting sexuality. Though taken as forced labor, Fusang takes into her own hands

the means to express herself in a way, as an empowered subject, that enjoys pleasure while providing service.

Sex can also be a weapon of terror as in the mob rape. These various sexual encounters and images in the novel cumulate in the rape scene set in the 1870 riots in Chinatown. Fusang is a victim of rape, and Chris participates in it. The white mob justifies their act of violence on the rationale that the Chinese prostitute is corrupted morality and has no decency. After being dragged into a horseless carriage, men take turns coming through the curtain:

You don't call for help; you don't bite or scratch. You reach for the jacket of each man, and during his wild heaving, you bite off a button. You don't call them names, you just open your body toward an expanse of nothingness. You concentrate on opening yourself, time after time, except for your fists, which are full of buttons. (209)

The narrator recounts how Fusang resists the rapists' need to make her feel diseased, corrupt, and degenerate, in so doing, she turns Fusang into the role of a resisting subject. Fusang manages the trauma of racial and sexual difference, registered on her body in the form of violent penetration.

MacKinnon argues that “a rape is not an isolated or individual or moral transgression, but a terrorist act within a systematic context of group subjection, like lynching” (654). Here, Fusang’s body becomes a scapegoat for all the anger and resentment based on racial logic and an exclusionist point of view to exclude Chinese and subjugate the Chinese race as an inferior race. The way in which racial violence takes a sexual form has an interesting parallel in how the narrator understands the connection and difference between the Cultural Revolution and the racial violence, which I will elaborate on in the next part of the chapter.

There are a couple of important passages in *Fusang* narrated from Chris's perspective that is removed from the English translation of *The Lost Daughter of Happiness*. These passages not only complicate the relation between Chris and Fusang but also elevate her image to earth mother goddess. Chris’s attachment to Fusang is an Orientalist fantasy, but also an Oedipus complex toward Fusang, invoking a mother he lost a while ago. We recall when Chris is first introduced to Fusang at the age of twelve, he says, “Her pursed lips and lowered lashes lent her face all the gentleness of a mother” (14). Upon Chris’s repentance over the rape, he cries,

“Fusang’s eyes filled with tears, but she didn’t let them fall.” “When a mother sees a child sobbing with such pain, she is bound to be affected” (250).

The most significant omission from the translation is the one that extols Fusang's image as the image of earth mother goddess. Regarding the rape scene, the essential femininity lies in a boundless ability to countenance suffering and regenerate life. When Chris is seventy years old and is close to his death, he finally realizes:

扶桑没有接受过强奸这概念。就象她对受难的态度。她对自己生命中的受难没有抵触，只有迎合。她生命中的受难是基本，是土和盐，是空气，逃脱，便是逃脱生命。克里斯记得十四岁时，他看见扶桑从是个男人身体下站起的形象。那形象是守难的光华。²⁹ 243

Fusang never accepts the concept of "rape." Just like her attitude toward suffering. She resists none of the sufferings in her life, just accepting. Suffering is the fundamental thing in life; it's earth and salt, it's air. Escape them is like escape life.

²⁹ Yan, Geling 严歌苓. *Fusang* 扶桑. Beijing: Renming Publishing House (人民文学出版社), 2015

Chris remembers when he was fourteen, and he sees Fusang stand up from

beneath men's body, that image shines as an image of suffering. (translation mine)

Fusang's endurance of physical suffering and triumphant inner strength in overcoming these pains has been used here to parallel to Christianity's Jesus image of suffering for the good of humanity. Uncannily, her unbending attitude of forgiveness elevates her from "prostitute" to "earth mother goddess." Fusang is imbued with inert goodness and forbearance at human suffering and even racial antagonism.

These lines omitted in the translation may also raise questions for American feminists about the troubled all-acceptance of Fusang. According to Jin Wen, who conducted an interview with Silber, the translator, about the translation omission, Silber says that "these passages are 'too sentimental' and 'overstated'; they are 'telling instead of showing' the reader what to make of the character Fusang (qtd in Jin 580)".³⁰ As critics argue about the lack of voice in Fusang's representation, critics also find fault in Yan's depiction of her sexuality as non-discriminating, and non-resisting. Her body becomes a vessel, all taking and non-resisting.

³⁰ Jing Wen. "Transnational Criticism and Asian Immigrant Literature in the U.S.: Reading Geling Yan's *Fusang* and Its English Translation." *Contemporary Literature*. 47.4 (2006):570-600.

These untranslated passages were what undoubtedly prompted Chinese critics to interpret Fusang as an “earth mother goddess” figure. Chinese literary scholar Chen Sihe read Fusang as the signification of the weak and devastated China that fights against the strong Western world with its power of forbearance and the virtues of kindness and forgiveness, who represents the Eastern culture of “weak people seeking to survive the perishing environment (ruoshi qiu shengcun 弱势求生存).” He claims that the artistic image of Fusang proves the power of the weak. He says: “This power is like the silent and profound earth that can hold any filthiness...Needless to say, the mother of the earth, [Fusang] is like the earth itself. The silent earth has everlasting vitality. It allows anyone to tread on, contains all things, and is magnificent” (67).

According to Yan, Fusang’s inner freedom and her mighty heart are as strong as the earth. Yan claims in her article “Xing yu wenxue” (Sexuality and Literature) that the character Fusang represents an Eastern form of femininity:

我在描写扶桑这个人物时，时常感到她身上体现了一种古老东方才有的雌性，是”后土”式的雌性，不可能被任何文明和文化所”化”的雌性。在她无原则的

宽容，无歧视的布施，她的存在哲学和理性化的西欧文化间，我意图在表现超越雌雄范围的雌雄关系。(245)³¹

When I write about Fusang, I often felt that she embodies ancient femininity, an "earth mother goddess" femininity. It is the kind of femininity that cannot be assimilated by any civilization and culture. With her bottomless forgiveness and indiscriminate giving, I intended to display a kind of relationship between the Western culture and Fusang's existential philosophy, which is about sex yet surpassing the scope of the male and female. (my translation)

Both Fusang's social position as a racialized, sexualized object and her refusal to be subsumed into sexual desire enables her to become an agent of new modes of subjectivity. Yan used Fusang's freely given sexuality to indicate her all-forgiving, all-loving, divine earth mother figure. Her sexual nature, as "eastern femininity" in Yan's term, though is weak, has strength as its other side. In Fusang, Yan turns to her inner spiritual strength to naturalize sexual acts Fusang has to perform as a prostitute. The image of a mere "Chinese prostitute" turns into a legend, an

³¹ "Xin yu Wenxue 性与文学" [Sex and Literature] Boximiya lou 波西米亚楼 [*The Bohemian House*]. Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 2015.241-248. This is initially a speech for Chicago Chinese Writing Association.

earth mother figure, and a source of all that is good. The figure of the prostitute, often condemned by both sides of Pacific as a filthy, degenerate, demoralized identity, has been turned around by Fusang, and by Yan, as the weakest takes on the strongest, and the divine via the "earth mother goddess" image of the essentialized femininity and maternity.

Fusang's forgiveness of Chris's biggest sin in participating in the gang rape is a good illustration. Three years after the Chinatown riot and the rape, Chris returns from England and takes up an English teaching post in Chinese schools run by the Rescue Society. In these three years, the rape and the act of violence he exerted on the woman he claims to love torment him. Chris's whiteness and his joining the white boys raping the Chinese prostitute underscore the power structure of one race over the other. He tries to atone for his sin by first distancing himself from Fusang but fails. During the rape, Chris misses a button, which Fusang bit off and hid in her hair for all those years. After he resumes his relationship with Fusang, he hesitates to come clean but ultimately admits that he is one of the rapists in the riot. After one sexual encounter between Chris and Fusang, the button falls off Fusang's hair. Chris suddenly realizes Fusang knew all along one of her rapists is Chris, the one who kissed her and made her feel disgusted

and humiliated. Chris is overwhelmed by the knowledge that Fusang kept the button for so long but still embraces him back and generously grants the forgiveness that he so desires. He cries, and Fusang kneels to comfort him. Chris asks himself, “who was this woman? A saint who could forgive anything?” (249) “He saw her kneeling form through his tears. It was beautiful.” “She knelt there, forgiving the whole world once more” (250). Many years later, at seventy, Chris saw the image of Fusang kneeling again. He realized that “his whole upright life had been ushered along by Fusang’s forgiveness” (250).

The sexual transaction is what she gets used to, and she refuses to feel diseased, corrupt, and degenerate. Instead, she is elevated to the godmother figure. Her open body takes the image of open land, for the use of and service to men. Fusang's open sexuality, generosity in love, giving nature, and forgiveness finds no better explanation than what Yan intends her to be, an earth mother goddess figure who intends to use love to forgive the sins of the world and man's world, of race wars and male violence over women. The divinity of Fusang rises above the familiar trope of the prostitute as a fallen woman. Yan uses this trope in many of her other stories and female figures. She affirms women's agency by giving them the power of the weak (like in

the case of kneeling) and suffering, of profound goodness and unbelievable perseverance and endurance in the time of hardship.

Toward men, Fusang shows her generosity and all-encompassing forgiveness, a generous giver not only of her body but also her love. Chris could not understand the "beauty" of Fusang's kneeling. What is interesting, and profoundly baffling in Chris's eyes, is Fusang's readiness for "kneeling," readiness to naturalize this position as "harmonious," not a humiliating position. Her readiness to take the "kneeling" position, the position of the weak, at every moment in her life is what Chris does not understand. No complaining and no fighting back, her nonchalance deludes young Chris. One day many years later, around the time he was forty, he remembers, "it was a beautiful image. Because deep down she really was free; she had the kind of freedom that rescue or salvation could never bring, the kind that nobody could ever give or take away" (198).

Moreover, later Chinese men elevate her to the legendary folklore figure whose attention they all vie for and to whom they propose marriage; they even initiate the tong (gang) violence, fighting over each other in her honor. The business of prostitution is a dehumanizing exchange of sex for survival. Prostitutes sometimes provide indentured servitude and unrecognized labor.

They remain faceless and voiceless in the immigration history. Yan strategically positions Fusang as sexually “open” and “giving” in order to sustain the male labor society’s sexual needs, giving solace to their emotional needs. After serving many men, she hardly remembers anyone, but she treats everyone equally and works diligently. The equality and generosity she gives contrast with the time and period when Chinese has to cluster in Chinatown to feel safe from the hostility and racial violence waged against them and exist within the segregated living quarters and job market to survive the hostile time. The forever delayed dreams of a family reunion in the United States or China destroyed many men’s spirits, among them Da Yong’s. Their leaving home becomes a one-way ticket, which means they never return.

Denied being a wife, Fusang is also destined to remain childless. At the age of twenty-two, two years after becoming a prostitute, Fusang has had five aborted pregnancies. Yan offers a sharp critique of the racial logical and gender domination at the time. Chinese women immigrants like Fusang case are discouraged from producing future Americans. Madsen argues in her article that "The racial link to China precludes the possibility of a Chinese mother producing the next nationalized generation as 'authentic' Americans" (45). In this way, "the

cynical image of the coolie laborer as ‘a worn out steam engine’ who cannot reproduce Americans in America while his wife remains in China finds a powerful counterpart in the figure of the female Chinese prostitute who labors temporarily in the work of nation building but can reproduce herself neither in the United States nor in China” (45).

As she happily serves the men in the Chinese community and grants equal opportunity to anyone who pays her, Fusang lifts and blurs the boundary between wife and prostitute. In the very end of the novel, she even appears more mythic in the mix of the folkloric and mythic fantasies. At the end of the story, many of Fusang’s Chinese clients construe her effortless accommodation to their sexual needs as an expression of submissive affection and consequently propose to buy her out of prostitution and marry her. Fusang marries Da Yong before his execution. In a nominal sense, the institution of marriage would not set Fusang free, because the marriage is a false promise the first time, and purely ceremonial the second time. It indicates that Fusang has no real marriage in her life. When Chris gets older, his memories of Fusang lead him to think of Fusang as a form of primitive femininity and maternity. Fusang’s rejection of marriage triggers

profound confusion in the young Chris. Though she resumes her original identity as a married woman after such a long, twisted journey of her life, she is still alone, and she is still herself.

With this bizarre wedding ceremony on Da Yong's execution day, Yan seems to contravene the historical fact that many Chinese bachelors in the United States, even those who were married in China, never reunited with their families. The irony is not lost on the contemporary reader, or to Fusang. Fusang's gesture of marriage is ceremonial and undertaken to restore her position as a rightful wife to Da Yong, which she never was and will never be. However, on the symbolic level, the marriage of a Chinese frontier man and an immigrant woman is a unification of "Chineseness" that can't be broken. "Chinese" identity is where Fusang and Da Yong claim their true selves lie and who they truly are. Through various misfortunate events, they wandered in the United States and found life hard and racial tension high. The very "Chineseness" they claim, and which allows them to feel at home with themselves, is an object that is ridiculed, hated, and despised. The final scene ends with an image of a matrimonial union of these American pioneers, this Chinese immigrant couple, with no future offspring, but at least, their union symbolizes the survival of "Chinese" people in the

United States. The continuing life of Fusang after returning Da Yong's casket to China is an indication that Chinese immigrant women are here to stay. Their very survival instinct and strategy, no matter how harsh living conditions are, will give strength and power to the later generations of immigrant women, including the narrator.

3.2.3 Chineseness in Trans-historical, Trans-generational, and Transnational Flux

By depicting the visuality and sexuality of the historical figure Fusang, Yan interrogates this formation of American national culture through the exclusion of racial others in her version of Chinese American history. Regarding narrative strategy, Yan strategically adopts the first person "I" as the narrator, self-identified as a contemporary Chinese immigrant writer of fifth-wave immigration who is married to a white husband and lives in the San Francisco Bay area. There are some biographic similarities between the narrator and Fusang, such as living in the same area and both having interracial relationships. However, the narrator and the protagonist could not be more different from each other. They are from different social-economic backgrounds, and they immigrate to the United States in different milieus of U.S immigration history. What connects the two women and the two generations of immigrant women are sexual

and racial oppression in China and the United States. More importantly, they share Chinese femaleness, and their immigrant lives continue to be defined and restricted by racial logic and racialization of Chineseness in America and by their connection to China, their place of origin.

The first connection between the two women is their identity as immigrants and their traumatized experience of immigration. In talking about these one hundred and twenty years Chinese immigration history, through the narrator's interpretation of her situation and Fusang's, we see how intolerance and exclusion are ever-present realities in the world of the Chinese immigrant:

You've only been here a month, so you haven't really seen this town called Gold Mountain. You don't know how cruel people can be to men with queues and women with bound feet. As one steamship after another arrives, they can smell the war and famine at your backs. . . The same thing happens when we come pouring out the airport gates and people suddenly stare at us so anxiously. Suspicion on both sides elides a hundred years of history and the past shoots right back through us. (18)

In Fusang's time, a few years after California gained statehood, Western expansion, and completion of the transcontinental railway spur the strong presence of WASP mentality, that America is first and foremost a white nation. Chinese coolies and prostitutes were forever the foreigners within, who were economically dependent but culturally and racially others. As workers, Chinese coolies met the demands for cheap labor and Chinese prostitutes served to stabilize the workforce; as aliens, they helped define "Americanness." The exclusion denies "Americanness" to the Chinese and perpetuates the "foreignness" of Chinese within national white supremacy ideology.

One hundred and twenty-some years later, in the narrator's fifth-wave Chinese immigrant experience, new Chinese immigrants who come from a Communist China are still perceived as the "other" and viewed with suspicion. In the Cold War era, the loss of China to communism ensues decades of antagonism against Communist China in the foreign policy of the "iron curtain" and America's internal witch-hunt McCarthyism. These spark the imagining of "Red China" in public. It further antagonizes China as an enemy state and perpetuates Chineseness as "foreign" and "alien other."

In this passage, Yan, via the narrator's voice, points out the xenophobic racism that confronts Chinese immigrants throughout the century. The perpetuation of "yellow peril," viewing Chinese as posing a threat to American nationhood, survives through the century.

According to Gary Okihiro, the concept of "yellow peril" helps to "define that challenge posed by Asia to Europe's dominance and was inscribed within the colonialist discourse as a justification for the imposition of whites over nonwhites, of civilization/Christianity over barbarism/paganism...And while serving to contain the Other, the idea of the yellow peril also helped to define the white identity, within both a nationalist and an internationalist frame" (137-138).

Chinese immigrants also share a survival strategy with their "industriousness." To depict Chinese immigrant communities' genealogy of survival, Yan writes, "You survived in your day, and we go on surviving in mine" (153). Talking about immigrants' experiences, both of the generations cross national borders at a different time, and though time has changed, "We haven't changed much. We still quietly toil away, like the Chinese panning for gold in the most depleted mines, using the most primitive methods to accumulate wealth. Our wealth builds up the way

dust does, barely. Your industriousness and forbearance have come right down to us, this fifth wave of yellow immigrants” (154). The very survival in America of generations of Chinese is brought about by resorting to an inner strength of this Chinese cultural tradition of forbearance, hard work, and hope. Chinese American identity is formed in the history of labor by humiliation and perseverance in the new land. However, as in Fusang’s time, the successive generations of immigrants’ contributions to the building of the nation have often been overlooked, marginalized, and erased.

These traits were incorporated into “model minority myth” of Asian Americans, which are conceived in the material terms of their social advancement and upward mobility. The mass media in the 1960s and 1970s notes and attributes the success stories of Asian American families to Asian family values and responsibilities, hard work, self-help, and academic achievement.³² As Colleen Lye argues in *America’s Asia*, “Traditionally, ‘yellow peril’ and ‘model minority’ images have been identified with turn of the century anti-Asian agitation and the civil rights

³² It starts with 1966 issue of the *U.S News & World Report* and then many other reports follow in the years to come.

struggles of the 1960s, respectively, and are thought to mark the revolutionary journey of the Asian immigrant from rejection to domesticated acceptance” (5).

Chinese immigrants are often perceived either as either "yellow peril" or "model minority" through Chinese American history. In fact, they are always the two sides of the same coin, depending on the general public's perception and the political rhetoric in America at the time; views of Chinese immigrants can easily sway from one side to the other. During the time of the early 1850s, Americans view Chinese labor positively, but by the late 1870s, when the economic recession kicks in after the completion of the transcontinental railway, Chinese laborers become the scapegoats of the labor war. Therefore, being industrious and hardworking are seen as positive traits in the good times and indicators of social mobility and a "model minority"; however, in the bad times, these same traits are regarded as despicable, an inhuman way of sacrifice, and substandard living. In the contemporary Chinese immigration wave, Chinese immigrants again are viewed as a "model minority" with their industriousness, thriftiness, and forbearance. However, whether it is "yellow peril" or "model minority" myth, it is a discourse that perpetuates Chineseness as other and "perpetual foreigner."

Eye-to-eye contact, the direct, unmediated gaze of recognition, intensifies the bond between Fusang and the narrator. When the San Francisco anti-Chinese race riots of 1870 happen, many European immigrants themselves joined the anti-Chinese crusade, in part to demonstrate their whiteness and thereby their Americanness. Right before the white mob rapes Fusang, she made eye contact with the narrator, and the narrator says to her “You taper off a note, and raise your head to look at me. You know that only those of later generations will be able to figure this whole thing out” (206). The shared gaze of the two women reinforces their solidarity. They recognize their shared struggle for subjectivity. Looking at one another, staring through space, they appear wholly focused on their encounter with Chinese femaleness.

The narrator says that the event is incomprehensible, how “hatred” is conceived and understood and used by one against the other. Yan also debunks the hatred, the group violence mentality, how this hatred is not personal “revenge” if it takes the form of collective action, then the hatred becomes contagious and violent because “people quickly become intoxicated by the sheer spectacle of destruction”(206). It cannot be justified in rational terms anymore. “The pleasure of watching some person or thing destroyed by one’s own hand is virtually orgasmic”

(206). That is why she used sexual term “orgasmic” to indicate the collective madness driven by the blind force “serve only the purpose of fulfilling an overwhelming emotional need” (206).

With the strange turn of the rape scene of Fusang, as the narrator tries to comprehend the racial hatred of the time, she goes back to her early experience in China witnessing the unfolding of the Cultural Revolution. The narrator says, “When I was a child I saw those sexual impulses they called the Cultural Revolution and those orgasms they called rebellion. The gratification of hatred produces the same rapture everyone...” (205). The narrator’s understanding of the violence and hatred of the Cultural Revolution gives her a hint of racial hatred and violence that happened to Fusang. This hatred is understood like the abstract concept of “love” across time, space, and national borders.

On this specific exploration of the concept of "hatred," Yan brings in what happened in China during Mao's years in connection with the early immigrant experiences of racial hatred. Therefore, she also brings in how these two different periods shaped the character's understanding of herself. Though both are extreme measures of violence, one is violence of one racial group against another, and one is assumingly one class against another: the proletarian

class against capitalist elites. However strangely, they do share one common ground, as violence against perceived difference. Though the motivation and the context could not be more different, Yan tries to tie hatred with the metaphor of sexuality. Of course, Fusang's rape takes the form of sexual violence, an ultimate violation of woman's body as an expression of hatred.

Both the contexts of violence from which hatred stem could not be further apart from each other. The "sexual impulses" that the narrator witnesses and understands are somewhat revealing. Many of members of the white mob that rape Fusang is like Chris: young men in their teens who have developed both a fascination and disgust for Chinese. The easiest way to get their sense of justice is to enforce violence on a woman's body, and the violation of the body takes on the hatred. These white mobs, no matter their age, even though many of them could be young, impressionistic men like Chris, acted out without better knowledge. In a metaphorical sense, the immature, irresponsible, and overt "sexual impulses" the narrator uses accurately explain the young, easy-to-manipulate young Red Guards during Mao's Cultural Revolution, who idolizes Mao and follow ideological differences between classes strictly and start the class war between citizens. They are both controlled by their strong beliefs in a specific ideology. In

Fusang's time, these white mobs were heavily influenced by constructing a white America and wiping out any elements that are not. In Mao's China, controlled by Mao's ideology of pure class, the young Red Guards wage a class war and want to wipe out anyone who is not a member of a worker, farmer or soldier class. These people, mostly young, are easy to sway and influence in ideology. Even if they are not young, their behaviors speak about their immaturity, blind by their emotions and swayed by politics, as well as self-interest.

To the narrator, the contemporary racism takes subtle forms, more "illusion," as the narrator laments, "We cannot even find direction in fighting discrimination. It comes concealed in too many different forms now; it is too subtle, too sophisticated" (155). Explicit racial hatred and racial violence still exist. The narrator correlates Chinatown riots in the 1870s in the final rape scene of Fusang with what the TV has been broadcasting in today's news. In today's Chinatown dried oysters are burning while someone exclaimed, "Chinamen actually eat this crap!" (204). This distaste for ethnic food corresponded to earlier racism when Chinese were accused of eating rats. The rape scene in 1870 is intercut with a contemporary TV talk show that features a hate group of skinheads and rednecks. An Asian American caller calling into the talk

show has been confronted with their response that their tolerance is a form of control. The skinhead interviewee explains to the caller, "if we didn't put up with you, we wouldn't be able to control our hatred, and that would be worse for you. . . We firmly believe that one day we won't have to tolerate you. We have some important work ahead of us" (208).

The 1960s and 1970s in America, the era of the civil rights movement and anti-Vietnam War, paved the way for the narrator's time, the 1980s, and 1990s. Those earlier decades witnessed an increased awareness of racial and cultural identity. It was also the era in which Asian American student movements asked for Asian American studies curriculum on campuses, and the formation of pan-Asian American identity took shape. From these rednecks' point of view, these anti-racist movements and assertion of ethnic pride posed a threat to the cultural dominance of white Anglo-Saxon America. The narrator at this point directs the reader's attention back to the earlier material manifestation of this hatred—a hatred that "feeds on itself, simply for its own sake" (205).

Their racial and sexual differences connect the two generations of women. What the narrator seeks is to understand their shared Chineseness, a gendered and racialized experience of

immigration, to reshape their understanding of themselves in a drastically different world in the land they now claim as home. The myth of building a “white nation” drives the racial high tide in Fusang’s time. The violence of racial hatred manifest in the looting of Chinatown and then in the burning and lynching of Chinese. A century later, America ideologically has been more accepting of ethnic and racial diversity; however, the implicit racism still targets racial and gender differences.

The trauma the narrator experiences in Mao’s time, the violence, the ignorance, and the madness she witnesses and experiences, need the spiritual power of healing. So does the immigration experience of Fusang. On one level, the narrator details Fusang’s traumatic experience, seeing parallels to her own traumatic experience of the Cultural Revolution and immigration. Through these efforts, the narrator seeks to reconnect, and eventually to recuperate from, her experiences growing up during China’s Cultural Revolution and the traumatic experience of immigration. Being dislocated and displaced in an unaccustomed land begs renegotiation of what Chineseness means, especially what being a Chinese woman means in the American context.

In the historical span of one hundred and twenty-some years, it is not surprising to see Yan establish the historical connection between Fusang and the narrator, as both live at periods of significant historical conjunctions between China and the United States. Their respective times mark both Fusang and the narrator. They both immigrated to the United States at important points in China's history, when it changes its national course when met with a national identity crisis, seeking rejuvenation and redefinition. Fusang is from an imperial China that is crumbling down when faced with imperialist aggression and internal instabilities. The narrator is from Communist China that has recently concluded the darkest chapter of modern China, the Maoist era. Therefore, "Chineseness" in these transitioning periods is often at its most impregnated moment of influx.

Though at different times, their experience of China's patriarchy is alarmingly similar. In Fusang's time, the Confucian ethics and ideology have a stronghold in controlling women's lives, and the emperor is regarded as the father of the state. In the narrator's time, the country has been under intense Communist ideological control, and Mao is regarded as the paramount leader/father of the country. Though both times are fraught with difficulties and contradictions,

Fusang and the narrator arrive at some point to understand their gendered identity in relation to racial oppression and cultural hegemony.

The airport suspicion recalls the "red scare" of the McCarthy era and the continued perception of Chineseness as foreign other to be viewed with fear. What also connects the two women's experience is defined by their gender. As argued earlier, Maoist China, the legacy the contemporary Chinese woman carries, substitutes the state for "father," as state patriarchy that the new immigrant continues to fight. The racist stereotype of the Chinese female as an Orientalist, the sexualized object continues to exist. The contemporary woman immigrant has to go through the historical trauma of the erased history of the early immigrant women and the recent past of the state violence of the Cultural Revolution. Displaced women from history need the healing power that women of an earlier generation exert upon the next generation of women.

The voice of the narrator represents the fifth-generation woman writer coming out of Mao's socialist country after experiencing leftist radical ideological. These women look for freedom from the constricted socialist culture; they look for success and prosperity, as they tasted socialist poverty. Women are vulnerable yet strong; they come on their own free will, they

stay in Chinatown but eventually move out of Chinatown. Marriage to them is a transaction, like in Fusang's time, a trade-off; sex is a means to the gains. The voice of contemporary woman immigrant is pieced from the experience of early woman immigrant, with their shared frustration of subordination to the patriarchy of Maoism and capitalism. The contemporary woman has a voice that Fusang does not have, has a choice that Fusang does not have, has an intellectual faculty that Fusang is denied. The historical denial and erasure of early Chinese immigrant women are stunning and glaring. The subaltern cannot speak. It further marginalizes them because of the prostitutes' unglamorous history.

Apart from the racial domination of Chineseness imposed by America's racial discourse, their gendered femaleness brings to the fore another layer of the lived reality of Chineseness. The sex difference and their femaleness are shared in their interracial interest and interracial love and their view on woman's power of sexuality. The voice of the narrator supplements the gaze, the doubt of institution of marriage, and the possibility of love. On the topic of "prostitution," selling bodies for a livelihood, the narrator easily dismisses it and offers a parallel of today's institution of marriage that is based on "selling" for economic benefits. She says, "Are there any women out

there who aren't selling themselves? Aren't I? How many times have I lain unwillingly beneath a man, like a pile of merchandise?" (224). The ethics of the patriarchal society demand that women yield their bodies up as sexual tools for men's use but censures them if they themselves gain pleasure from such use.

The historical trauma has left a real physical trace in the sites and continued function of Chinatowns. Chinatowns are sites that prove Chinese American history is a lived history and is still alive in the memories of many. As homage paid by the narrator, Chinatown is where she calls Fusang's name, seeking her "alternate" historical self. Many times, the narrator will stand at the specific same location in Chinatown where the phantom of Fusang can be seen and talk back to Fusang. The narrator stands at the same locale as Fusang, but at different times, as if she was transported back to the time and space just like "One hundred and twenty-eight years ago, you and he stood where I am now." By standing on the same sites, the square, the streets, and the storefronts, the narrator commemorates Chinese American history and in particular Fusang's experience as part of the history. More often, the narrator's desire to establish the trans-historical connection is to understand Chinese immigrant women's history in America and specifically in

San Francisco Chinatown, i.e., to create a trans-historical connection by compressing time and space to the same specific locale of then and now.

When California starts to urbanize and industrialize, San Francisco becomes the economic hub of the West. Chinatown, the urban ghetto, also speaks about the segregation of the ethnical enclave. In the time of the 1870s, Chinatown is regarded as the ghetto that is full of Chinese vices, such as opium dens, brothels, tong wars. Since the Gold Rush in the 1950s, Chinese immigrants labor first in mining, then on the transcontinental railway. After the completion of the transcontinental railway in 1869, a lot of Chinese laborers came back to “Dabu 大埠,” the Chinese word for the first harbor, later translated as Chinatown. They start to develop and offer ethnic services to Chinese such as restaurants, laundries, boarding, and of course prostitution, etc., in the rapid urbanization of San Francisco area in the late nineteenth century.

For Chinese immigrants, Chinatown forms a Chinese community for these workers; a cheap place to stay when they come ashore; sites that offer a teahouse, opera house, grocery, laundry place; and, of course, the vice of entertainment such as an opium den and brothel. For the Chinese community, Chinatown is the opposite of what American media portray it to be; it is

a gathering place for Chinese, living quarters, a site that offers some livelihood, such as employment, entertainment, and social life to Chinese in America. The narrator went to the square in Chinatown and comments on the lives of Chinese people living in Chinatown, "For seventy years, it's been a gathering place for old Chinese men, a place to play chess, sing opera, and exchange stories about prostitutes" (148). These men worked in the fishery, in agriculture their whole lives until they couldn't work anymore and retired to Chinatown. "None of them had ever scraped up enough money to marry" (148). Apparently, she laments the forced immigration policy that prohibits family formation in Chinatown and secludes Chinese in this quarter, i.e., Chinatown, as a bachelor's society.

Not only does it stand as an essential locale for the Chinese community in the early immigrant history, but it also serves as a welcoming place for the latecomers, providing services, comforts, and a transitional period for new immigrants. Here's how the narrator describes her early immigrant days: "We flock to Chinatown too to limit our culture shock. We too crowd into cramped, shabby apartments, a group of us splitting the rent, a sense of safety a matter of everyone feeling equally unsafe, a sense of good luck a matter of everyone feeling equally

unlucky" (153). The difference between now and then is after setting down; the new immigrants have the option to "break out into non-Chinese territory" which is denied to early immigrants (153). Early immigrants are segregated into Chinatown economically, culturally, and socially.

Often the pronoun "I" slips to "we" in the narrator's voice. Fusang's story, as has rightly been pointed out, is a composite of a lot of different historical accounts of different prostitutes during this historical time. It is also a story about two women immigrants from different generations across more than a century's time, trying to excavate the past for the present, reconstruct the collective memory, form the narrative of self-healing, and converse with people of the same experience. For example, the narrator finds the Mission Home in Chinatown, where historically a lot of Chinese prostitutes lived, and where a memorial hall has been built. She also met a seventy-nine-year-old Chinese lady the Mission Society last rescued. They would sometimes get together to reminisce about the glory days of Fusang, to commemorate Fusang. Talking about Fusang's story is something that they could share and could become part of their collective history.

Yan's text examines the contours of the narrator's identity and historical relationships with China and her fictional relationship with Fusang. The protagonist Fusang's voice is taken over by the narrator. The narrator often intervenes through space and time, interprets, and speaks to her. Fusang, as an early immigrant woman, has no voice in the history but left some images in the historical archive, which the narrator explores; in her exploration and attempts to understand Fusang we see through her eyes who Fusang was. The narrator has little access to the protagonist but relies on textual images and narratives in her construction of Fusang, a historical woman. The later generation of immigrant has a voice and, more importantly, can engage in self-writing, an agency of writing to heal the historical trauma experienced by Chinese immigrant women retroactively.

It is easy to detect the autobiographical similarities between the narrator and Yan the writer. Yan deploys an autobiographical mode as a process of analyzing and evaluating her immigrant experience. Philip Gambone writes in his review of the book that the protagonist remains “inscrutable” to the reader and wonders how this strategy adversely affects Yan’s

feminist purpose.³³ Yan's feminist project is to save Fusang's story (and the stories of other female Chinese prostitutes) from historians' misappropriation. The novel is the product of the narrator, picking up what she reads and connecting with her own immigration story to form her understanding of Chinese prostitutes and Chinese American history. But it also alerts the audience that the Fusang they come to know from the novel is filtered and constructed by the joint efforts of the white, male-dominated discourse and the narrator herself. The narrator explains in the story, "I probably don't know a thing. How can I possibly analyze or explain a historical figure like you? I can't even analyze or explain my contemporaries, let alone myself" (187). In the very end of the novel, Yan lets her narrator acknowledge that all her research and writing about this (in)famous historical figure are based on the materials written possibly by Chris, who become a Chinese historian and gathered by the narrator's husband, who is also a white man. The narrator insists that her husband's history and hers "will never be the same" (274).

³³ Book Review "The Lost Daughter of Happiness." *New York Times Book Review* May 13, 2001.

Visual, voice, and eventually the most potent, tool, writing, take over and open the discourse, give back the life of Fusang, and establish the connection among women between immigrant generations. In a sense, the act of self-writing constitutes a theoretical project to create the self by transforming the narrator's way of seeing or what Adrienne Rich calls (r) e-vision(ing)—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (18). The narrator exercises her agency as a fifth-generation immigrant woman from China in telling Fusang's story, and by her audacity insists on a historical presence. In this narrative arrangement, Yan can constitute a new kind of subject like Fusang, and thereby enable the narrator to discover who she is. As bell hooks writes in "Oppositional Gaze," in "looking and looking back, black women involve us in a process whereby we see our history as counter-memory, using it as a way to know the present and invent the future" (104). The hope lies in creating the possibility for a meaningful rediscovering and reaffirmation of female agency in Chinese immigrant women in writing a history of her own.

CHAPTER 4. CONCLUSION

The transnational experience of Ha Jin and Geling Yan and their transnational narratives continue to speak to a later generation of Chinese who migrate or immigrate to the US. In a growing number, Chinese are facing a transnational reality of their lives. After coming to the U.S in 2008, I have experienced America first as an international student, then as a professional woman in American academia. Since 2008, I have embarked on a typical journey for a new immigrant to this country. The dissertation is initially inspired by my reading of Ha Jin's *A Free Life*. In his *A Free Life*, I see the struggle of Chineseness in Nan's pursuit for an authentic artist self. In the newly realized reality of American landscape, history of Chinese in America is a revelation to me. So is the limitation of social and cultural space as an immigrant in this country has when you are a racialized minority in America.

Additionally, as one of the later generation of Jin and Yan, my experience of post-Mao China shows my ignorance of China's past, its tradition, its culture and its legacy. I do not understand the transitions China as a country went through in the whole twentieth century and is still going through in the post-Mao era. I had some memory of the early 1980s when blackouts

were frequent, and the food was still rationed. Gradually, the life has been improving, and opportunities abound. There are still many contradictions and conflicting realities in China. The biggest challenge is how to resolve and reconcile the fast development of China as a global capitalist economy while it still is under the reign of the communist party? In the grand narrative of state construction and communist leadership of turning China into a "socialist country with Chinese characteristics," "Chineseness" continues to metamorphose towards incorporation of recognition of newly changed reality in the post-Mao era.

Jin and Yan becomes a particular case study, among many of their peers, of those who went through and come of age in Mao's period, and their lived experience and honest portrayal of the time and people who lived through the time, gives us a literary evidence and efforts against the amnesia that imposed by the communist party in China. Both address in their works, as exemplifies in their work of *White Snake* and *Waiting*, the failure of Mao's socialism on the fundamental human and societal level. Jin represents in his work *Waiting* the failure of Maoism in the failure of the male protagonist Lin Kong's inability to assert self and claim a life of his own. Yan in *White Snake* portrays how women who lived through Mao's "genderless society" is

prone to be puppets of political movements and persecution, and yet managed to survive and live a life true to their gender and sexual identity. Both writers address the failure of Mao's socialism in the fact that it failed to establish a viable new identity for its citizen in the national project of so-called "new woman" and "new man" in a New China. Mao's socialism also fails as it shows at the end of both novels that the Post-Mao era will reverse many policies in Mao's era.

While Mao's legacy, in particular, the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was discredited within China following Mao's death in 1976, the evaluation of Mao's legacy remained problematic. The Chinese government official line in post-Mao era continues to define the Cultural Revolution as a "ten-year turmoil." The official verdict collides with the official narrative of glossing over this historical period in Communist Party history as well as national history by simply designating it as "national tragedy." This purposefully undermines the Mao's period and consequently politically enforces public amnesia of Mao's history. When China's Communist Party is still in power, the cultural memory of Mao's years and the legacy of its policies in the 1990s has been swept aside for the wholehearted embrace of "socialist-market" reform and economic drive to prosperity.

In China, serious examination and honest discussion on Mao and Mao's legacy is scarce and limited or quickly forgotten. In fact, the remembrance is best done from outside China, that is from the "periphery." Mao's rule and its revolutionary history indeed remain one of the central and recurring topics visited and re-visited by post-1979 Chinese immigrant writers and by diaspora writers in general. After Tiananmen protests, the government's direction shifts from liberalism in governance towards shutting down the conversation of political change. It steers people towards a future, not a Mao's utopia Communist future, but a globalized capitalist future. People are forgettable of Mao's China when the new reality of China sets in, and all the strength and energy requires of them to adapt to. China's future relies on the grand trade-off between government and its people. As long as government delivers its promise of economic prosperity, its citizen will consent to the governance with little political involvement and challenges to its legitimacy. The balance sheet hangs in the air. However, as long as Chinese communists party is still in power, the questions of history and Maoism will remain dormant.

That makes Jin and Yan who write critically and creatively about Mao's period particularly valuable. Their works continue to bear witness of history with a sober mind and

heart. They point out the human tragedy, leadership failure of the period and offer a critical reflection that so very much needed in where China is heading today. From a distanced position away from China center, they carved a creative space for themselves, debunking the traditional homeland in a unison chorus. The artistic creativity therefore released, represents the best intellectual effort in demystifying Mao's China.

In their "Chinese immigrant narratives," their works also contribute to Chinese immigrant literature in United States, which is much understudies in the U.S. Discussing this notion of fictional homeland and authenticity in "Immigrant Autobiography: Some Questions of Definition and Approach," Sau-ling Cynthia Wong posits that "American publishers know that their reading public will not be keen on reading the lives of immigrants, but rather, they know that it is traditional China (later, Communist China) that excites the American imagination" (306). Jin and Yan both add their voice and left an indelible mark on the long line and tradition of Chinese immigrant literature since the early 1850s when Chinese first migrate and immigrate to the U.S. In post-1979, after China reintegrates to the global world, this new transnational flow of people, capital, ideas between China and U.S. complicates visions in the narratives of both writers.

Although it has brought with it constant anxiety regarding home and homeland, roots and routes, it has also given a sense of liberation and the opportunity to develop a dual perspective on Chineseness. On the one hand, there's the "decentering" of "Chineseness" from the cultural center of China. On the other hand, there is the discourse of "Chineseness" embedded in the Chinese American identity in the American context. The transnational movements enable new immigrant sensibilities to emerge, ones that are bounded by the nation-state and even rely less on native tongues.

In the chapters on *A Free Life* and *A Daughter of Happiness*, I argue that in their "Chinese immigrant narrative," they often feature a transnational subjectivity that question Chineseness in Chinese/American identity formation. Debates and negotiation of Chineseness in America have added discourse on race, ethnicity, and gender in the U.S. context. As first-generation immigrant authors, both writers create an alternative space to represent the struggle their characters experienced, the challenges of displacement and alienation in the new land. They demonstrate awareness of American racial discourse on "Chineseness" and how it shifts and changes and how it affects Chinese experience of America. The production of immigrant

literature has tied to national sentiments of public readership that corresponds to national rhetoric towards China and by extension, Chinese in America. Immigrant literature gives immediate acknowledgment of transnational ties and regards transnational relation between China and America affect how Chinese is treated and live their lives in America. Moreover, how and whom America allow for entry to the U.S. is also reflected in how and by whom the immigrant literature is written. There's an acknowledgment from both writers. Chineseness is racialized in the U.S. and American dream is tenuous. Exclusion and inclusion underline construction of Chineseness in Chinese immigration history in the U.S. Edward Said's Orientalism of troubled European perception, creation, knowledge of "Orientals" applies here in the U.S. in the similar fashion regarding how they constructed an 'Orientalized' Chineseness. In this unbalanced power relation in designating it either as undesirable or desirable and sometimes both, the conflicting images and discourses of "Chineseness" in the U.S. is troublesome. Both writers are acutely aware and sensitive in their portrayal. We see the continuation of how "Chineseness" shifts meanings and changes in American's racial discourse. The earlier labor scar marked "Chineseness" as heathen, filth, diseased, full of vice. The contemporary "red scare" continues to

mark "Chineseness" as part of enemy traits, and should look with suspicious, with possibilities of treason and espionage. The pendulum shifts to one side and then another. On the one side of the pendulum is "yellow peril," while the other side of is "model minority." As international relations change, the national perception of "Chineseness" also shifts positions. Chineseness becomes part and parcel of Chinese racialization and frequently gendered discourse in the United States.

China has changed itself dramatically and miraculously in the past four decades after Deng's "Reform and Opening Up." Under new leadership, China has moved its national policy away from Mao's ideological driven period and reintegrated itself to the world. Today China is the biggest benefactor of globalization. It becomes the world's largest manufacturer and soon the world largest economy. China, forty years ago, resembles today's North Korea, embittered in its ideological war, led by Mao in its extreme insecurity cut off to the world. The comparison and contrast of Mao's China and today's China cannot be so dramatic.

On February 25, China's president Xi Jinping abolishes two-term limit as an unprecedented move for the first time since 1979, arousing worldwide speculation and suspicion

of possibility that he might rule for life. Many of his policies have a Maoist bent that includes stronger internet censorship and clamping down on civil liberty of civil rights lawyers and journalists. There's an observation that President Xi has been centralizing the power on himself and there's a fear of him becoming another Mao. In 2016, America elected Donald Trump as its 45th President. Since President Trump took office in 2017, there has been a strong backlash towards liberal immigration policies, and we witness escalating trade war with China. What does it mean to Chinese people who live through the period of this dramatic social-economic and cultural change in the post-Mao China? And as China continues to change and the international relation between China and the U.S. remain uncertain, it invites future studies on the metamorphosis of "Chineseness" influx across China and U.S. national borders.

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