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## Living between Dialectics: a Bakhtinian and Lacanian Reading of Jade Snow Wong's Fifth Chinese Daughter and Maxine Hong Kingston's the Woman Warrior

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LIVING BETWEEN DIALECTICS: A BAKHTINIAN AND LACANIAN READING  
OF JADE SNOW WONG'S *FIFTH CHINESE DAUGHTER* AND  
MAXINE HONG KINGSTON'S *THE WOMAN WARRIOR*

XiaoJun Luo

156 Pages

This dissertation creates a dialogic web encompassing the sociocultural and psychological aspects of Jade Snow Wong's and Maxine Hong Kingston's autobiographies *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *The Woman Warrior*. The American mainstream society and Chinese patriarchal community have conceived insurmountable ethnic and gender differences that are inherent in Wong's and Kingston's growing-up environment. The dissertation argues that how the two authors perceive the way of how these differences have been conceived is central to our understanding of their representations of ethnic female consciousness when they are writing as both subjects and writers. The dissertation notes that Wong's and Kingston's texts are like a mirror reflecting how they are informed by the principal social ideologies such as Orientalism, the American dream, and the patriarchal definition of womanhood.

The dissertation goes on to argue that the literary strategies Wong and Kingston have adopted in their texts function to represent the difference of the protagonist's world longtime suppressed by dominant social values, and the mixture of different cultural and

literary elements in the text metaphorically manifest the dialogic nature of American ethnic literature and culture. The dissertation contends that all these strategies have political implications because they are used to challenge the conventional unitary literary language.

**KEYWORDS:** Dialogism, Mirror Theory, The Symbolic, The Semiotic, Difference, The Other

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XIAOJUN LUO

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of English

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

2015

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I wish to dedicate this dissertation to my son, XiaoBao: the sweetness of his conception and the delight of his company over the last few months have filled my life with sunshine. I could not have completed this journey without him.

X. J. L.

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CHAPTER I  
POLITICIZED AND HISTORICIZED CHINESE-AMERICAN  
FEMALE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Maxine Hong Kingston once mentioned Asian-American writer Jade Snow Wong's influence on her in an interview, "I'm not sure that I got help from former generation of Chinese-American writers except for Jade Snow Wong, actually her book was the only available one." It is this remark that has sparked many scholars' interest in these two Asian-American women writers, and their autobiographies are often juxtaposed with each other to be discussed from various perspectives. In looking at these two books, it's easy to find ourselves very much identifying with Chinese-American writer Ha Jin's sense of the challenge facing ethnic women writers: when a writer decides to start her career, she must "justify [her] endeavor" by asking herself, "To whom, as whom, and in whose interest does [s]he write" (3). The writer's subject matter, identity, and purpose are often issues open for attack, and in some particular circumstances, they form the criteria to judge her works. Back in Wong and Kingston's eras, when it was especially so that culture and literature were dominated by homogeneity and Asian-American literature was denied its access to the national canon, the consideration of these questions must have greatly impacted their writing process and shaped what their works should be like.

On the other hand, when Chinese-American writers choose to write about themselves, they are doing something against the Chinese-American cultural and literary

traditions that rarely encourages individuality. How to “rightly” represent a history of racial and gender discriminations as well as Chinese-American culture is also a risky task, demanding much courage and discretion. Autobiography seems to permit the author the artistic autonomy to present his or her American experience and development; however, the author’s ethnic identity complicates his or her writing situation, and it is even more so for a woman writer. Ethnic female autobiographers’ writing can become more strategic after their desire to freely express themselves is subdued or repressed by their awareness of their double marginal social status. The collectivistic, patriarchal Chinese community and the exclusive American mainstream society have led to this particular reflection on the difficulties that ethnic female autobiographers have encountered and the subsequent attempt here to disassemble racist and sexist stereotypes they have had to confront. These factors have undoubtedly dictated their writing and thus are two primary rhetoric concerns in their writing process. This reflection also makes me interested in the social aspects of Wong’s and Kingston’s individual identities and their constant negotiation as writers with different cultural norms.

My dissertation considers ethnic female autobiography as a social as well as psychological site for ethnic women to claim America. My goal is to establish an interactive relationship between the writers, their social contexts and their works by examining the particular fashions they use to present themselves, and exploring the reasons and motives for doing so. To be more specific, I am seeking to get us to examine how particular social circumstances have motivated their urgency to find a way to best articulate their voices and obtain heterogeneous readership.

Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* enjoyed immediate popularity after its publication in 1950 and gained a diverse readership. Today it is often referred to as the first book written by a Chinese-American writer and the first one accepted by mainstream American society. Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* was published in 1975; it is now regarded as a classic and has earned a place in the national literary canon. Although Wong and Kingston are authors in different eras, they are writing different personal experiences and taking on different personae in their autobiographies; both books are concerned about what it means to grow up ethnic in an America accompanied by difference and inequalities that define their living conditions. And, both writers make use of their family histories and the history of Asian America to forge their own identities. They are not just writing their personal history; their individual history affiliates with a larger sense of social history, in which each author anchors her writing. This is common among all ethnic writers, according to the Asian-American writer Frank Chin in the preface of *Aiiieeeee!*, an anthology of Asian American literature: "the subject matter of minority literary is social history" (xxxv). What the author does is to stitch together some incidents in their lives according to some larger consciousness. As Kingston says, "my concerns were larger than just myself or even my gender but to write about the other gender, and a larger history" (Lim, *Reading Back* 159).

Therefore, this study connects the two authors to provide a fuller picture of Asian-American history and to explore the history of Asian-American literature. Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* was written in a time when Asians were still called "Oriental" and were largely stereotyped, victimized by prejudice and discriminated against. At that time, Asian-American literature had not yet existed. Wong had to write her own story in the

third person with the consideration of its reception in the Chinese community, “Even written in English, an ‘I’ book by Chinese would seem outrageously immodest to anyone raised in the spirit of Chinese propriety” (qtd. Culley vii). In the decades that followed, historical incidents such as the Civil Rights Movement, the Women’s Liberation Movement, and the Asian-American Movement have greatly raised Asian Americans’ ethnic and gender consciousness. With the publication of *Aiiieeee!* in 1974, Asian-American literature officially announced its own existence. Ethnically conscious members began to abandon the term “oriental” and call themselves “Asian Americans.” Asian-American studies became gradually received and established as an academic discipline in many institutions. Moreover, Asian-American studies today is more interdisciplinary than it was first established. As a branch of Ethnic Studies, it is in close relation with the other disciplines such as African-American Studies, Latino/a Studies, and Native American Studies.

Some feminist scholars consider *The Woman Warrior* as “a breathtaking leap in female consciousness” (Lim, “The Tradition” 263), and Kingston’s postmodern style as especially revolutionary in her time, whereas Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter* is seen as nothing but just another success story that “thus in no ways adds anything in terms of real knowledge where the general public’s picture of Chinese people are concerned” (Blinde 58). Some scholars argue that it would not be fair to compare the two works without considering the social context they are respectively written in. The twenty-five-year gap between the publication time of the two books, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* being two decades ahead of *Aiiieeee!*, and Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* one year after it, is an important fact for understanding the rhetorical situations of the production of the two

books. Despite the chronological differences, both texts show the continuity of how the definition of what it means to be an ethnic woman in America is changing and they thus offer a grounding for further exploration of issues such as literary tradition, genre conventions, feminism, Orientalism, postmodernism, the Civil Rights Movement, race and gender. Putting the two books at the intersections of these areas enables us to explore many ways in which ethnic female autobiographers have used their discourses to present themselves.

The tumultuous 1960s witnessed an astounding amount of social change. The Civil Rights Movement greatly inspired writers of many racial minorities in the ensuing decades. Meanwhile, the themes about assimilation that used to dominate ethnic literature were questioned and interrogated by Ethnic Studies scholarship, which attempted to define ethnic culture and literature in relation to the dominant national culture and literature. Ethnic minority writers, led by African-American writers who were empowered by the Black Power Movement and the Black Arts Movement at that time, had also begun to help minority artists articulate their own voices and negotiate with the dominant culture about their rights and social justice in their works. Nevertheless, as African-American literature began to gain more and more national attention, Asian-American literature was still one of those literatures that was often marginalized or ignored by the mainstream publishing establishment. Such social circumstances contextualized the inception of Asian-American literature, which was marked by the publication of the anthology *Aiiieeee!*. Shaw Wong, one of its editors, talked in an interview about how they recognized the exigency of the publication of *Aiiieeee!*; “They were publishing African American anthologies with riveting titles like *Black Fire*, *Black*

*Rage*. There was only one voice that was being published—you had to be angry or in jail or from the ghetto. They weren't publishing Latinos or Chicanos, Asians or anybody, just African Americans” (Patridge & Wong 94). The mission of *Aiiieeeee!*, as stated by Shawn Wong, is “to educate the audience about something called Asian American literature, the tradition” (94). Asian-American scholars attach a lot of importance to the publication of *Aiiieeeee!* in the history of Asian-American literature. Asian-American literary critic King-Kok Cheung calls its editors “socially forerunners” who “were instrumental in securing the freedom and diversity of expression enjoyed by Asian American writers at present” (*Interethnic Companion* 17). Its chief editor, Chin, is regarded by Shawn Wong as the “Godfather of Asian American literature” (Patridge & Wong 96). University of California, Berkeley Professor Emerita Sau-ling Wong also responds positively and points out that the views *Aiiieeeee!* puts forward “represent the first articulation of the possibilities of a Chinese American literary identity” (*Interethnic Companion* 40).

However, the term “Asian-American literature” is really hard to define due to the complex population the term is structured around. In order to be more focused on “what Asians in America share in how they can be compared within the context of their American experiences,” Asian-American literature is generally accepted as a body of literature produced in English by American Asians (Kim, *Social Context* xi). This definition does not include “writers in Asia” and “writers expressing the American experience in Asian languages” (*Social Context* xi). The problematic definition of Asian American literature has left Asian-American scholars with some questions—what they should write about, who will be their audience, what the writer’s responsibilities should

be, and what tradition they should follow—that are all matters of controversy. Even today, how Asian Americans should relate to Asia and how the identities of Asian Americans can equally represent each of its ethnic groups have continued to be hard questions to answer.

As a matter of fact, a debate took place soon after the publication of *Aiiiiieee!* centering around the political and aesthetic concerns in the interpretation of Asian American literature. The dominant side of the debate, of which Chin was the leading voice, positioned Asian American society as a group discriminated against in racial and cultural terms, and he stressed the political responsibility of the writer to speak for his community as well as a “politically charged interpretation of Asian American literature” (Lim, “The Tradition” 252). What Chin was targeting was the hegemony in American literature: “writing is white, the standards of art and culture are white, and this tyranny by the whites has been an oppressive force on non-white arts” (“*Rendezvous*” 295). Chin's emphasis on group solidarity and his attempt to prescribe a paradigm for Asian-American literature was opposed by writers who hoped to possess individual artistic freedom as mainstream writers did and who thus tried to play down the political tone in their works. In their quest for self-interest, they were more identified with the mainstream value of individualism and therefore tended to concentrate more on the development of each writer's personal preferences in terms of themes, styles, and technique. However, individualism went against the Asian cultural tradition that tends to value the interest of the community more than anything else and does not encourage individuality. As a result, individualism and its related literary issues came under serious attack from Chin's side.

Not surprisingly, in a culturally homogeneous society, the writers' position toward the dominant ethnic nationalist ideologies is usually given more attention than their artistic craft. This debate could have taken place in any society where there lacks freedom and equality for writers. I was working on this chapter when I heard that the Chinese writer Mo Yan was awarded Nobel Prize for literature, which soon became a hot topic on the Chinese Twitter Weibo. Mo Yan, who started his career while serving in the People's Liberation Army, is currently the associate chair of the government-sponsored Chinese Writers' Association. He is the only Nobel Prize winner officially acknowledged by the Communist government. The other three include the imprisoned peace prize winner Liu Xiaobo, the exiled peace prize winner, the Tibetan spiritual leader Dalai Lama, and the literature prize winner, the exiled writer Gao XingJian. The public discussions of these three recipients were censored by the government. Noticeably, Mo Yan, whose name literally means "don't speak" or "be silent" in Chinese, received overwhelming disapproval from many public intellectuals for his uncritical and even submissive attitude toward the current system and his silence on social issues. According to them, in such a country where writers are heavily censored, persecuted, or exiled, Mo has been behaving exactly like his name, which is not politically right. Like Kingston and Wong, Mo was expected to bear the responsibility to speak up for other silenced writer and for a less restrictive censorship. It seems that a writer can hardly stay apolitical in such a situation. Whether a writer should be evaluated by his or her voice in the public is a contentious question, but the discussion of it continues to influence the writer's consciousness.



Asian-American scholar Xiao-huang Yin identifies the two positions in this debate as two opposing approaches to Asian-American literature: a socio-ideological approach and an aesthetic-individual approach. In fact, this distinction was not something exclusive to Asian-American literature. It was very common in literary debates within other racial minorities as well, especially in the decades before the 1980s, when many writers were propelled by the awakening ethnic consciousness and the desire to assert racial justice and social rights for their communities. However, since the 1980s, affected by increasing multiracialism and multiculturalism in American society, this distinction has become blurred and more diverse perspectives have entered into literary discussions. Both approaches have inadequacies: the socio-ideological approach, though important, is like a “homogenizing invocation of ‘ethnicity’ as a unifying force” and tends to ignore the specifics in text and contexts of ethnic literature, and it is more likely to depend on “universalist literary theories” to interpret the issues in terms of race, ethnicity and gender (Kim, *Social Context* xi; Wong 4). The individualistic approach, which arises out of some writers' desire to have the same artistic freedom as writers in the mainstream society, fails to acknowledge that, as a marginalized group, writers cannot avoid addressing their relation with the mainstream society and literature. Moreover, to gain freedom is itself a political act. In writing their lives, ethnic women are asserting their right to speak freely as well as presenting their reality with an alternative authority.

The individualistic approach in autobiographical studies was proposed by the French literary theorist Georges Gusdorf in 1950s and has become the conventional approach ever since. It tends to consider the self as an isolated human being without realizing the importance of “a culturally imposed identity for women” (Friedman 34). It

especially fails to account for the living conditions of ethnic women defined by gender and ethnic discrimination and how they experience what it means to be a self in the American context. It neglects the fact that ethnic women writers' representation of self is the outcome of the negotiation between their individual freedom and the institutional power. It is out of their fear of the loss of male power that Chin and his colleagues try to set the tone for Asian-American literature, which set up obstacles that Asian-American women writers had to surmount. Despite a desire to keep their work personal, ethnic women writers' sense of self always exists in relation to the Other, and the identity they strive to build in their autobiographies can never be autonomous. For example, Kingston, on the one hand admits that *The Woman Warrior* is "an I book; it is very self-centered" (Lim, "Reading Back" 158). However on the other hand, she also exhibits her social consciousness and points out this book is also about "self-understanding, understanding myself in relation to my family, to my mother, my place in my community in my society, and in the world" ("Reading Back" 158). Kingston ultimately admits her own political purpose for which she might feel reluctant to agree: "But now I'm beginning to see that it may be the obligation of artists to have a vision of a future. We need an idea before we can create who we are and what our society is" (Skenazy and Martin 110).

Chin repeatedly took advantage of his position as the chief editor to defend Chinese-American culture against its "negative" portrayals by Kingston and other female autobiographers. Up to that time, some Asian-American writers had already published their autobiographies telling stories from their family history and sharing their own American experience. Chin viewed autobiography as a fake genre that violated the heroic tradition of the classic Chinese literature. Since it was something from Christian tradition,

he called these autobiographers including Kingston, Amy Tan, David Henry Hwang, Gus Lee and others “Christian soldiers” (Yin 241). In the introduction to the anthology *The Big Aiiieeeee!* Chin and his co-editors made a list of “fake” Asian-American autobiographies and questioned the efficiency of this genre to define Asian-American literature because it, in their opinion, is not authentically Chinese. On the top of the list is Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*. In the first essay of *Big Aiiieeeee!*, “Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake,” Chin called Kingston “the apotheosis of the tradition of Chinese-American autobiography” (26). He continued to point out that the myths in *The Woman Warrior* such as “White Tiger” and “Fa Mu lan” were Kingston’s revision of classic Chinese myth and were not real “yellow” art, that what Kingston and other autobiographers were doing was just to “boldly fake the best-known works from the most universally known body of Asian literature and lore in history” (3). Obviously Chin underscored cultural authenticity as an important quality of literature. Kingston and other writers’ reinventing practice, according to Chin, is a distortion of Chinese culture, and is “simply a device for destroying history and literature” (3). Chin was deeply suspicious of the authority of these writers to represent Chinese-American history and thought they would undermine the efforts to combat the mainstream cultural hegemony and stereotyping. Wong’s writing in the third person singular in *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, can be seen as a sign that testifies to the collectivistic cultural norm Chinese-American writers had to face up to in earlier decades.

This debate has created an impression that Chin was battling with a group of Asian-American woman writers because the writers charged by him were mostly women. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that, in this seminal anthology that many agree founded the

field of Asian-American literature, of all the writers it canonized, there was not one single woman writer; Asian-American literature therefore is called by some woman writers “a unitary construction of male identity” and has “‘anti-female’ overtones” (Lim, “The Tradition” 253; Kim, *Social Context* 197). Chin expressed a strong disapproval for Chinese-American woman writers including Jade Snow Wong, Amy Tan, Maxine Hong Kingston, etc., for reinforcing “the stereotypically unmanly nature of Chinese Americans” by peddling “orientalness” in their words (*Aiiieeee!* xxxi). He criticized these woman writers for being “white washed,” for misinforming the mainstream society with fake knowledge of Chinese history and literature. He also blamed them for not having a true consciousness in their works due to their subscription to the notion of double consciousness, with which they often had to know themselves in relation to others. However, what is politically significant about Kingston and Wong is that they had challenged the authorities of Asian-American literature who tried to speak with a unitary voice. The role of Asian-American women writer has begun to be taken seriously since then.

As women writers were marginalized in the Asian-American society by its male critics, more and more feminist scholars have joined the discussion and spoken against the overwhelming political tone and blatantly misogynist attitude. Cheung, for instance, points out that the editors of *Aiiieeee!* “discounted the work of most foreign-born Asians and discredited the bicultural tension that often does surface in literature by both immigrant and American-born writers” (*Interethnic Companion* 2). Asian-American scholar Elaine Kim ascribes the “anti-female overtone” of *Aiiieeee!* to “the effects of racism on Asian American manhood [that] are a critical issue in the works selected by

Chin, Chan, Inada, and Wong for their anthology” (*Social Context* 197). Sau-ling Wong also calls attention to how the tone of Asian-American literature was set by male writers, “[i]t was Frank Chin and his associates [...] who in their prefatory essay affirming cultural dynamism, set forth most of the terms debate on what counts as Chinese American literature” (Cheung 40). As the woman writer who received her most fierce attack from Chin, Kingston’s long-term battle with Chin is almost unavoidable in the discussion of Asian-American literary history. Ironically, *The Woman Warrior* has now become the most acknowledged Asian-American work and most widely taught in American universities. To adequately analyze this book and credit Kingston with her due respect necessitates revisiting this text from multiple perspectives instead of being restricted to either socio-historical or aesthetic approaches.

Some scholars consider this debate as “an argument between nationalism and assimilation” about how to properly represent Asian-American culture (Lowe 33). It is the contradiction between nationalists’ attempt to “affirm the separate purity of its ethnic culture” and those who believe in the “standards of dominant society” (Lowe 33). Asian-American literary scholar Lisa Lowe thinks that the debate should not be reduced to these binary conceptions of ethnicity which further bolster the essentialization of Asian Americans’ identities. Instead she contends that it is a debate about “identity and difference or identity and heterogeneity, rather than a debate between nationalism and assimilation” (Lowe 33). There are also some other scholars who look at this debate as one between nationalists and transnationalists who are seeking an identity beyond ethnicity. This debate has enlarged the conflicting positions in the interpretation of Asian-American culture and literature and invited more and different voices into the dialogue.

As part of Asian-American literary history, the debate has proven to be fundamental to our contemporary understanding of Asian-American women writers and their present positions in society.

Despite the polarizing positions, there is something in common between the two sides of the fence: both are fighting for rights for themselves and both are resisting dominant cultural norms in a society in which they are marginalized. Chin's nationalism can be traced back to the heroic complex in classic Chinese literature in which values of ordinary people are never respected. He was obviously making use of literature as a weapon to fight for group interest. However, he certainly creates a problematic counter discourse to confront the hegemony of European-American culture. Some major premises and assumptions underlying his remarks give rise to the concern whether the hegemonic ideologies are reinscribed among Asian-American writers whose culture has already had the tradition of female submission and male domination. As Lowe observes, "it is equally the process by which positions of otherness may ally and constitute a new majority, a 'counterhegemony'" because a distinctive feature of hegemony lies in the existence of a "relationship between 'dominant' and 'minority' positions" (28-29). Although this debate is not particularly concerned with gender hegemony, Asian-American woman writers must deal with the unfavorable male censorship of Asian-American literary establishment. It is worth paying particular attention to why they still choose to write in spite of their lack of the right to speak out in public forums and to how they write themselves within and against the constraints imposed on them in order to critique their situations. Perhaps answering these questions helps us look more clearly at ethnic women

writers' rhetorical situations as described at the beginning of this chapter and the rhetoric strategies they adopt in their work.

This debate in some way signals Asian-American women's presence and participation in redefining Asian-American literature. Since Asian-American male and female writers may identify with each other through shared experience of racist mistreatment, we may think of combating racial discrimination as the primary concern of ethnic female autobiography. However, it should not be ignored that, unlike male ethnic writers who often dramatize their ethnic consciousness, the most immediate realities for ethnic female writers are still a patriarchal familial and communal environment and a male dominant literary society; thus they tend to have a stronger gender consciousness than ethnic consciousness. They choose autobiography as a form of self-expression largely out of their desire to be free of the female submissive Asian-American society and to align themselves with the mainstream value of individualism. But the form of Asian-American female autobiography is often full of paradoxes, in which we can discern certain patterns of resistance. Very often the writer's search for her place within the community and her family alternates with her searching for the meaning of her identity as an American citizen in the majority society. Discrimination and prejudice she has encountered in both social spaces have led to the writer's vacillating emotions toward them.

Yet Chin's negative criticism of Asian-American women writers' autobiographies is rooted in the entrenched ethnic nationalism, which requires the author's complete loyalty to an Asian-American community. He relies on cultural authenticity to define the parameters of Asian-American literature and put emphasis on historical facts as the only

way to present a positive portrayal of Asian-American culture. Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, more than any other work of her time, looks like a "less stable version of authenticity" (Shapiro 6). Actually, before Knopf Publishing House published it for the first time, the publisher had a discussion with Kingston and then decided to publish it under the genre of nonfiction "autobiography" for the consideration of its acceptance in the market. *The Woman Warrior* obviously does not look like an autobiography, it does not meet our expectations for a normal autobiography: being factual, at least ostensibly, and having a sense of chronological order. *The Woman Warrior* is just a book made up of a few stories narrated from multiple perspectives, with little time and space coherence. It is a mixture of facts and myths, imaginary family history and real personal experiences.

There has been a lot of discussion about whether authenticity can be a criterion for literature. Can cultural authenticity be the criterion for autobiography just because it is concerned about the experiences of a specific cultural group? One thing is clear: there is no way to measure authenticity in literature. Even for autobiography, a genre that demands a lot of truth, it is impossible to achieve absolute authenticity. According to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, authors of *Reading Autobiography: A Guide For Interpreting Life Narratives*, authenticity of autobiography is just an "issue of trust" rather than the validation of the truth of the narrator's life experiences: "Persuasion to belief is fundamental to the pact between narrator and reader" (28). For one reason, the primary material of autobiography is memory about what happened many years ago. Memory could include facts, events, impressions, sensations, emotions etc. Memory is not trustworthy because it could get lost or could be wrong, which would keep readers from seeing any possible truth. The authentic narrative mode that emphasizes on the



precise capture of the past, according to Roland Barthes, the author of the famous essay “The Death of the Author,” is just “nostalgia for the past, nostalgia for a past ‘self’” (142). The distance between the author and the experiencing narrator is big enough to confuse the author’s discretion of facts and imagination. Of his own writing experience, Barthes says that most of the time he was writing “without...ever knowing whether it is about my past or my present that I am speaking” (142). Barthes calls his own autobiographical writing as “rewrit[ing] myself—at a distance, a great distance—here and now” (142). Recapturing the past as precisely as taking photos is almost impossible. Barthes gives a further explanation about this:

“This book is not a book of ‘confessions’; not that it is insincere, but because we have a different knowledge today than yesterday; such knowledge can be summarized as follows: What I write about myself is never *the last word*: the more ‘sincere’ I am, the more interpretable I am, under the eye of other examples than those of the old authors, who believe they were required to submit themselves to but one law: *authenticity*. (120).

Even if authenticity may be used to judge content, it is not able to evaluate literary skills. Also autobiography doesn’t include all that happened. The author decides what to include, how to organize, how to dramatize with various representational techniques, which all depend on her imagination. The autobiographer has to set the tone for the whole work and think about what self-image should be presented, what she is doing is more like being faithful to her present consciousness than to the past facts. She is distancing herself from her past and narrating from an omniscient point of view, exactly like Kingston’s account of her own writing: “It’s hard for me to call [the narrator girl] me, because this is an illusion of writing. She is so coherent and intense always,

through...And I'm not like that. It's impossible for a real human being to be that coherent and that intense day after day" (Thompson 6). Writing autobiography is thus a fictional practice. What the author puts at stake is always authenticity.

Nationalists seeking cultural authenticity in some way is seeking authentic ethnicity. Ethnic writers are always expected to truthfully represent ethnic traditions in their work. Obviously, it is not realistic for Asian-American writers who have grown up in America and have hybridized cultural experience to meet this standard. Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* challenges this standard more than any other work of her time. It looks like she is adeptly manipulating elements of different cultures in this book. Cultural critic Vivian Sobehack considers what Kingston is doing as creating "postmodern modes of ethnicity," which means "we can put ourselves together in almost any fashion we like—and our self-consciousness about so inventing ourselves tends to be reflected in the fact that the fashion we like asserts this 'right of representation' through pastiche or parody" (4). Ethnic Studies scholar Elliot H. Shapiro also argues in favor of Kingston, "Kingston is less interested in writing a novel which is authentically Chinese-American, according to Chin's terms, than in writing a novel which is, on her own terms, authentically American" (6). The different impression Kingston left upon Shapiro implies Kingston's deviation from the nationalist position, which is very common among ethnic women writers. Chin's emphasis on cultural authenticity reveals that he is ignoring or downplaying the complexities of the American society that consists of different cultural groups and the ways ethnic people are influenced by their intercultural experiences. In fact, no matter how hard ethnic writers try, they can never create something of pure

ethnicity. They often write from a multicultural perspective and their writing strongly reflects their hybrid cultural identities.

Does cultural authenticity really matter that much in literature? Literary works are often a good medium for readers to look at culture, history and social context. However, they are not facts and their authenticity is threatened once represented by the author. What is more significant is what ideas the work conveys and what reactions it can elicit from the readers because “great literature may capture what is happening in the depths of the individual and social mind” (Amirthanayagam 8). In this sense it’s more important for literature to be loyal to consciousness than to facts. In an autobiography, the young narrator may be unable to judge what is true due to her inexperience and lack of discretion. The author’s responsibility is to stay truthful to her consciousness and capture her thoughts and confusions at that moment. For example, Kingston uses a metaphor of night to describe how she as a toddler felt about horses. Kingston thinks she is being honest with readers, “I keep honest in the book by having such a strong point of view in the narrator. It’s from that girl’s point of view” (Thompson 4). Kingston holds that fiction can even be “truer” than non-fiction in the way that “[w]hen something that a person does in real life has a very strong impact, you can come up with an equivalent action just as powerful...Also a lot of times the action that you make up is stronger than the one that actually occurred, and it can be more to the point” (Thompson 7).

Then where does Chin’s ideology of authentic ethnicity in his political gesture come from? Kim argues that it results from the mainstream society’s practice of defining national identity through racial othering: “The notion of an absolute American past, a single source for American people, a founding identity or wholeness in America, is

rooted in the racist fiction of primordial white American universality” (*Social Context* xii). Kim continues to point out that this nationalist ideology in the nineteenth century encouraged Anglo-Saxon superiority and led to a series of historical incidents such as Indian removal, the Mexican War, the Civil War and the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act. The Chinese Exclusion Act was passed by Congress in 1882 as the first federal immigration law to suspend Chinese immigration based on the conception of racial inferiority. Although it was abolished two years later, it brought unmeasurable harm to Asian-American people. It wasn’t until this year (2012), under the resolution of Rep. Judy Chu, that Congress apologized to Chinese immigrants for the discrimination against them.

Cultural theorist Homi Bhabha regards this pursuit of pure origin as a colonial mentality that makes a rigid distinction between self and other. As Bhabha indicates, “[a]n important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of ‘fixity’ in the ideological construction of otherness. Fixity[...] connotes rigidly and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition” (66). In today’s world where cultural hybridity is becoming more and more a reality, Chin’s ongoing insistence on authentic ethnicity reveals his ignorance. Culture, according to Edward Said, in some way is “a theatre where various political and ideological causes engage one another” and “all cultures are involved in one another, none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinary, differentiated, and unmonolithic” (*Imperialism* xiii, xxv). Accordingly, as the product of the most hybridized culture, the American identity can never be a unitary and homogeneous one. Therefore, the nationalist interpretation of Asian-American literature is a kind of misreading without the

consideration of the hybrid nature of Asian-American culture. Similarly, Asian-American autobiography should be examined by looking at how strategies are used to represent the hybridity of American identity. Bhabha's description of the situations of non-dominant cultures may be inspiring. In his book *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha explains that when different cultures intermingle, they will be inevitably caught in the ambivalent "in-between space" (38). Bhabha also strongly disapproves the concept of unitary culture and contends that "[c]ultures are never unitary in themselves, nor simply dualistic relation of Self to Other...[T]he meaning and symbols of culture have had no primordial unity or fixity; even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew" (207-08). Shapiro rightly identifies the American identity as "hybrid, creole, or mestiza/o [that] not only destabilizes purity as a defining characteristic of American cultural identity, but more accurately reflects America's origins" (7).

Ethnic writers will not be able to create an effective discourse as a way to confront stereotyping unless they are consciously aware of the misconception that underlies the stereotyping practices: identities are fixed and permanent. This view of identity does not recognize difference. The emphasis of cultural authenticity and ethnic purity in the moralistic or nationalistic discourse laid down the basis of the biased judgment of Asian-American women writers and their choice of autobiography as a literary form. This ideology also tends to normalize difference and thus makes it fall into the stereotyping mode that it has been fighting against. The potential of transgressing all these limits can only be seen in a discourse in which "[e]very identity is placed, positioned, in a culture, a language, a history" instead of being "tied to fixed, permanent, unalterable oppositions" (Hall 46). Asian-American women writers need to find a "safe

space” in literature to construct a discourse where they challenge the boundaries of their lives and play with various cultural norms and the convention of the genre. Otherwise they can’t make a difference between their own discourses and the racialized and sexualized discourses. Autobiography as genre definitely provides the possibility for female writers to confront all types of stereotypes by creating an alternative authority.

In autobiography, identity is constructed through language that is politicized and historicized. There are no neutral language and objective messages. Personal history is represented in a language that “mediates the past with the present, through which history is grasped as difference, as fragments, shocks, and flashes of disjunction” (Lowe 2). Since each ethnic group speaks its own unique language, which Russian formalist thinker Mikhail Bakhtin terms as “social dialect,” to express their shared values and cultural norms, this social dialect becomes the language of heteroglossia “intersect[ing] with each other in many different ways...As such they all may be juxtaposed to one another mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically” (292).

Ethnic autobiography becomes a literary space which the diversity of social speech is reflected onto. When the authorial identity and the text are intertwined with both cultures they are living between, their writing style is usually characterized by distinctive “linguistic hybridization” signifying more diversity in their societal interactions. Accordingly, the interpretation of such bicultural texts should be based on this perspective: to what extent the text is made “a flexible zone, interweaved, crossed and composed by multiple discourses, constructed in different languages, tempos and places, received and lived with disparate meanings that are diversely embodied”

(Chambers 23). The establishment of heteroglossia in the discourse necessitates that the author be an all-conscious writing subject coming and going between different cultures in order to represent multiple voices of his/her society.

Autobiography is not only about what happened to the younger author in the material reality; it is also about writing what has happened. How the author looks at what happened matters a lot in this sense because she is the creative manipulator of all the elements that she uses to articulate who she is. Accordingly, autobiographical writing is a process engaging dialogue between the author's self and her society, and its social aspects and authorial intentions are equally worth exploring. Wong's and Kingston's books, although the protagonists show different personae, and the authors adopt different literary styles, basically belong to the era in which literature and culture were characterized by racialized and sexualized discourses. Accordingly the relations between minority and mainstream culture and the relations between different gender roles play out similarly in the two texts. These similarities as well as other differences can be seen as a result from the authors' similar or different use of ideologies in response to their particular social circumstances.

However, obviously the examination of social context alone is not adequate to explain how the authors look at the self, how they use particular narrative techniques to form the narrator and the authorial identity. Consequently my dissertation creates a dialogic web encompassing the socio-cultural and psychological aspects of the two books *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *The Woman Warrior*. In analyzing the representational strategies adopted by the two authors and their connection to the construction of self identity, this dissertation is in dialogue with feminist theory about identity, with academic

debates concerning the interpretation of Asian-American literature, and with scholarship about literary genre, notably autobiography. This dissertation argues that ethnic female autobiography is a social as well as a psychological locus for ethnic women to construct their American identity. The author's consciousness of social castration in ethnic and gender terms imposed on ethnic women results in her psychic differentiation, and thus makes her understanding of America radically different from that of European Americans. This kind of interaction between the author's external and inner world provides a feasible perspective to look at the collective consciousness many ethnic female autobiographies display despite their different social contexts. However, a time difference also makes a difference in terms of the author's ethnic and gender consciousness, as well as her consciousness in the choice of discourse as an empowering tool for confronting racist and sexist stereotypes that are perceptible in their texts.



CHAPTER II  
A BAKHTINIAN AND LACANIAN PERSPECTIVE ON  
ETHNIC FEMALE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Unlike white writers who are seldom concerned about their identities in racial terms, American ethnic autobiographers, due to their multivariate cultural identities, usually have a much more complicated rhetorical consciousness, which is clearly identifiable in the plot structure of their works. Ethnic autobiographies, characterized by a dominant theme of “growing up ethnic in America,” put much more emphasis on the coming-of-age phase of the protagonist than adulthood. In most cases they feature such a life trajectory: the protagonists are born and grow up in an ethnic culture. At a certain point of their childhood, they find themselves faced with a drastically different culture of a larger society. The disruptive nature of such a growing experience has greatly destabilized their initial sense of a unitary self established in their early community life and has complicated their subjectivity ever since. This double consciousness is a major point we should keep in mind in order not to read ethnic autobiography in the same way as we read Anglo-American autobiography: while Anglo-American writers have fewer concerns of racial and ethnic identity, ethnic writers may experience how their growing up socially marginalized by the dominant culture has caused an insurmountable gap between how they look at themselves and how the society looks at them. For ethnic female writers, the situation is, of course, further compounded by extra gender concerns.

Apart from the consideration of the acceptance of their works by readers from both cultures that define their social identities, especially, they have to at the same time cautiously circumvent sometimes harsh criticism from the ethnic male writers and critics who presume to represent the voice of ethnic literature to speak with the dominant society.

I see ethnic women's understanding of the relationship of self to the society, which is different from Anglophone writers who have privileged racial or gender identities, as the origins of their ways of autobiographical writing. Their writing also shares a commonality of wandering in search of some kind of coherent meaning out of an identity disrupted by a dominant culture that rules the state or the community; we can always see patterns of how people's mental growth can be accounted for by social forces. This commonality carries on across time: for example, Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* both display a collective female consciousness despite being published two decades apart from each other in their social settings; moreover, this characteristic can also be seen in other ethnic women's autobiographies.

In my opinion, American ethnic women's autobiographical writing is by no means a "monological" act (talking to oneself). Instead, it tends to become their creative and strategic response to something that exists in their society yet is embedded in their individual experience and consciousness. In a large sense, the writing is a balancing act between the author's inner world and her work's social reactions. Accordingly, my intent is to establish a relationship between two writers, Wong and Kingston, and what they write, comparing their understanding of the relationship between self and society by looking at how they handle a similar rhetorical situation: Chinese-American women

writers writing in a multicultural America, which I think is more significant than purely narratological analysis. It is in this direction that I seek an approach to *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *The Woman Warrior* to buttress my exploration of the complex formation of ethnic women's individual subjectivity by their social and psychological experiences.

Yet the complexity of writing as ethnic writers, especially as ethnic women writers who have not been fully comprehended by many people, sparks an intense debate on how to deal with the relationship between arts and politics, a fundamental and troubling question for ethnic writers across decades. Many ethnic writers take racial or gender politics as the opposite of art, and they fear will reduce the literary value of their works, asserting that they are not politically minded and socially conscious individuals. For example, they may show their unwillingness to join any literary societies, hoping to write just for art's sakes and be accepted by the American public. Kingston once admits her aversion to politics as a writer, "I used to want to get away from any political discussion because I thought it was important that the writer writes anything and there shouldn't be any usefulness to what we write. We do it for the fun of it and for art's sake, and should not think about constraints" (Skenazy and Martin 110). Autobiography can become a favorite genre among ethnic writers since it has supposedly satisfied those who are eager to pursue their creative freedom, which also makes a strong point in that famous debate on what Asian-American literature should be like.

Yet the ground behind the simpleminded assertion of freedom of writing can be explained away by the common misconception that autobiographical writing is basically a private act. This misconception demonstrates the influence of Gusdorf's individualistic model that is based on the belief that "[m]an must be an island unto himself. Then and

only then, is autobiography possible” (Friedman 36). This model always treats self in autobiography as “separate and unique” and attempts to create the sense of “isolated being” (36). Gusdorf’s individualistic model was prevalent in the 1980s and has been questioned and attacked by more and more scholars. Gusdorf’s critics argue that although the individualistic model may be more suited to autobiographies by white males who don’t have concerns about race and gender, this notion is not suited to ethnic women autobiographers because it ignores the “importance of a culturally imposed group identity for women” and meanwhile neglects “the differences in socialization in the construction of male and female gender identity” (qtd. Culley 34). In other words, Gusdorf’s idea overlooks the social restrictions imposed on ethnic women and hence is inadequate to account for how they experience what it means to be a self.

Mary Mason, a scholar in women’s autobiography, contends that this individualistic concept of self may be used to study St. Augustine and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s autobiographies, but women writers basically “[write] the self through the Other”: an aware self depends on its relation to the Other” (qtd. Culley 4). Another scholar, Susan Stanford Friedman, also sees the limits of the individualist model and argues that “[the] very sense of *identification*, *interdependence*, and *community* that Gusdorf dismisses in autobiographical selves are key elements in the development of a woman’s identity” (38). She continues to argue that “women’s sense of self exist within a context of a deep awareness in the construction of male and female gender identity” (34). The self-and-the-Other relationship, I want to say, is particularly prominent for ethnic women autobiographers because they have long been treated as the racial or sexual Other whether in the white-dominant larger society or in their male-dominant communities.

Ethnic writers write with a strong ethnic awareness resulting from their consciousness of the difference between themselves and the Other. It has been particularly so since the Civil Rights Movement in late 1960s. The social inequality that defined the living conditions of American racial minorities was often seen by them as the consequence of the mainstream hegemonic attitude toward difference in biological, social and cultural terms, and has motivated their desire to fill their lack. Since ethnic women's sense of lack basically derives from their acute awareness of their statuses in the larger society as well as in their own communities, the most relational to their double marginalized social statuses is their social Other: the white people and ethnic male power. It is this sense of lack that has involved so much of ethnic female autobiographers' psychological energy, shaped their points of view and guided their genuine autobiographical effort. Thus we can say, ethnic female autobiographers' ethnic and gender consciousness are the central part of their rhetorical consciousness and largely determine how they want to forge a new identity in their autobiographies.

Paradoxically, however, it is also due to this sense of lack that the freedom for ethnic groups to articulate themselves comes to the fore, and is usually placed prior to individual freedom. When they stand up for the right to speak, the overwhelming group consciousness brings forth a similar trend among ethnic activists: group members should ideologically align themselves with their groups and speak with a unifying voice against social discrimination. An ethnic writer is often expected to speak for the community before speaking for the self. This political correctness Chin and others used to judge Asian-American writers has much in common with the hegemony they are strongly opposed to: in their fighting against the mainstream cultural hegemony, a new hegemony

has been caused by the overemphasis of group cohesion and solidarity. These two kinds of hegemony are in essence the hegemony of homogeneity, which suppresses different voices and individual freedom.

As a means of exploring self-identity, ethnic women's autobiographical writing is virtually performed in the context of the formation of their ethnic and gender identities. Whether they like it or not, no matter how much they desire individual freedoms, the hostile writing environment has been affecting the way ethnic women writers understand racial and gender politics, which sooner or later they will realize is inherent in their autobiographical act. Besides formal and stylistic interpretations, I am also interested in Wong's and Kingston's inner struggles when their own artistic integrity encounters ethnocentric nationalism, patriarchal misogyny and racial stereotyping in American literature and culture, because it is crucial for understanding the authorial rhetoric of *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *The Woman Warrior*. Whatever happened in their lives must serve their present consciousness to rewrite the past as well as construct in art a new self-image. While individual freedoms are often not harmonious with group interests, the tension between the two seems to ease a great deal when ethnic women writers assume a collective cultural identity and concern themselves with racial issues. My dissertation will thus attempt to look at how these authors take their own positions to deal with such labels put on them as "pandering to the mainstream society" or "model minority."

Asian-American literature has had a lot of culturally hegemonic interpretations by biased white audiences that have been unknowledgeable of Asian-American realities. When Kingston published *The Woman Warrior*, Asian-American autobiography was still dominated by assimilative stories, which was the only acceptable formula for ethnic

autobiography in American society. Fortunately, as multiculturalism rises towards a crescendo in this century, scholars and critics have come to treat literature of racial minorities with a more open and receptive attitude. Also a multicultural awareness is essential for understanding Wong's and Kingston's autobiographies and the ethnic and gender identities they have created. To well explain the text and its epoch, the reader is supposed to acknowledge in ethnic female autobiography the two distinctive aspects of the characters' bicultural lives and consciousness and the textual potential of allowing multiple socio-historical voices to be heard; the autobiographies should be read as a dialogue between different ideological and cultural discourses instead of being judged by a singular standard.

Since ethnic female autobiography is the product of the interplay between the author's inner life and her society, both her work and that society look to each other for understanding as well. This perspective explains the interactive relationship between ethnic female writing and society: ethnic autobiography does not only provide us with knowledge of ethnic cultures, it also calls for the change of rules of how white society should deal with ethnic culture and literature.

In addition, my interest in the shifting definition of the national and individual identity across decades has led me to do the socio-historically grounded comparison between *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *The Woman Warrior*. I believe that intersubjective communication constantly happens between the act of writing and the act of reading. Wong and Kingston, at the moment of writing, must have had in their mind the questions of who is going to read their work and how would they read it. Obviously, their choice of writing in English and adopting a genre from Anglo-American literary tradition targets

mainstream white people as their primary readership. So they had to think about what kind of identification and resistance might be set between them and their texts. Ethnic female autobiography in this sense can be seen as the author's imaginative response to the widespread racial stereotyping that forms an important part of American thinking about national identity. Unlike the individualistic model that concentrates on the private level of autobiographical writing, this perspective also considers autobiography as a tool that ethnic female writers have used to affect social ideology.

Bakhtin can inspire us a great deal as we seek or develop a sociohistorical perspective for ethnic female autobiography. Bakhtin stresses the social meaning of language and argues that language should be understood in terms of its social context. A Bakhtinian view of language will support the point that language is an ideological tool and justifies an examination of the authors' narrative methods as a way to explore their responses to the dominant social ideologies of their times. Bakhtin's theory of dialogism bolsters our reading *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *The Woman Warrior* in an interactive way. According to Bakhtin, every piece of literary work should be seen as being in a dialogue with other works and authors. It is also in this sense that we should look at the process of its production. That is, the author is always writing in response to what has already been said and what will be said on the same topic. Bakhtin's theory of dialogism provides us with an epistemological model, according to which there are constant interactions between meanings. It disproves that writers are writing in a seclusive way and justifies making a connection between the two books and the periods they are situated in respectively, making it possible to see the development of Asian-American literary tradition and history.



Furthermore, the dialogic reading of the autobiographical writing of ethnic women writers can greatly prevent their works from being misread by readers who don't know much about their cultures, which is probably their primary concern when they write because they have often been misread by both sides of the two cultures they live in; they perhaps then have an urge to solve this problem. An outright misreading basically arises from a unitary view of culture and identity, which can be seen in the exclusion of a subculture in a society by its dominant culture. This unitary cultural conception considers American culture as a pure culture with a single source. It is especially the case decades ago in Wong's and Kingston's living eras. The "pure" "unitary" cultural view has been strongly disapproved by some contemporary culture theorists. For example, Bhabha points out that "[c]ultures are never unitary in themselves" (207); Said contends that no culture is "single and pure" (*Imperialism* xiii). Therefore, my intention of adopting Bakhtin's dialogic reading is an attempt to avoid interpreting American ethnic literature from a unitary cultural view. Instead, I intend to look at it from multiple angles, trying to look at the complexities and heterogeneity of American culture, which is "hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated and unmonolithic" (Said, *Imperialism* xiii, xxv).

Bakhtin's view of language is rightly concerned with language's social nature. He is more interested in concrete utterances or discourses than most structuralists' idealized form of language. According to Bakhtin, any one utterance is not an articulation of mere individualized emotions, but is situated in a certain context involving its speaker and listener(s); thus its meaning is generated based on the interaction between them instead of on rigid grammar rules. Therefore, language is dialogic, and is "not a neutral medium,"

but “populated–overpopulated—with the intentions of others” (294). In this sense, a writer is appropriating the words that have already existed to serve his /her intentions.

Bakhtin points out that every word has a history worth exploring because different meanings have been contributed to it by its users in the history. Bakhtin also emphasizes the heterogeneity of a linguistic community, inventing the term *heteroglossia* to refer to the multiple voices in a community that often exist in tension with each other. As he says, “[e]very concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear” (272). Therefore, the speaker produces an utterance by framing his or her knowledge of what has already been said on the same topic and imagining who will listen to it, what reactions the listeners might have. This kind of interaction is constantly happening in social communication. Heteroglossia is inherent in every utterance that is oriented toward its anticipated audiences, including its historical, contemporary, actual and imagined audiences. Bakhtin employs the concept of heteroglossia to study the novel. The novel from this point of view is a reflection of social heteroglossia, i.e. languages of different social groups. In a heteroglot novel the author speaks through heteroglossia of his/her epoch. If we examine ethnic women’s autobiographical writing in the same way, it is the author’s appropriating the words that already exist to achieve her purpose. In the languages represented, there always to varying degrees exist what has been said and what the author wants to say, depending on the author’s social consciousness and individual intent.

So Bakhtin’s view of language is also his view of writing, which provides a meaningful insight into the study of Wong’s *The Fifth Chinese Daughter* and Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*. The social nature of language, in my opinion, is the supreme value

of ethnic female autobiography. Due to the social nature of language, learning a language is a process of learning and assimilating social codes and norms expressed by that language. Ethnic female autobiography therefore can be seen as a product of the author's internalization of the norms of a rule-governed society, and any reading of Wong and Kingston should be positioned in a sociohistorical subtext that covers race, ethnicity, and gender interests. What's more, since autobiography is not only concerned about the history of an individual, but inextricably bound up with the history of the families, communities and the nation, for ethnic women, the very act of autobiographical writing is closely linked with the history of American literature as well. As literary scholar James Craig Holte notes, "the American question is a question of self, and the autobiography is a central part of American literary tradition" (qtd. Culley 253-54). Although Wong and Kingston are authors in different eras, they are writing different personal experiences and taking on different personae in their autobiographies, both books are concerned about growing up ethnic in the American context, and both writers make use of their family histories and the history of Asian American to forge their identities. Their individual history affiliates with a larger sense of social history, in which each author anchors her writing. This situation is common among all ethnic writers, as described by Chin in the preface of the anthology *Aiiiiiiii!*: "the subject matter of minority literary is social history" (xxxv). What the authors do is to stitch together some incidents in their lives according to some larger consciousness. As Kingston says, "my concerns were larger than just myself or even my gender but to write about the other gender, and a larger history" (Lim 58-9). Readers also have to rely on what each author has written to get access to her past.

French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan is another major influence that fundamentally supports the narratological analysis of *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *The Woman Warrior*. Lacan's Mirror Theory metaphorizes the mirror to describe the stage of a child between the ages of six and eighteen months when he is for the first time surprised by the mirror reflection of the self. Lacan considers this period of time as being crucial and having formative influence on the child's subjectivity. It is the first time when the child is aware of his relation to someone other than himself and his mother, and his curiosity toward the mirror image leads to his first inquiry into "who am I?" The sudden intrusion of this foreign image destabilizes the child's consciousness of self that is based on its inner self-image. A new reference, the Other, begins to exist for the child to imagine his own identity. This initial realization of the gap between the two images signifies the beginning of the child's subjectivity and his conscious search for a unified identity. The dialectical relationship between self and the Other and the interaction between them has fundamentally impacted the child's mental growth and anchored his understanding of the world. Lacan says, "this gestalt...symbolizes the *I*'s mental permanence, at the same time it prefigures its alienating destination" (76). The difference between the reflected mirror image and the inner self-image, according to Lacan, is essentially the dichotomy between an ideal self recognizable to the Other and the "authentic" self.

Lacan's Mirror Theory has been typically applied to literary studies to address issues concerning identity from a psychoanalysis point of view. Judith Oster, a scholar in cross-cultural studies, employs Lacan's mirror stage to describe immigrants' crossing between their own culture and the dominant white American cultures. Mirror and

mirroring often happen in bildungsroman narratives by bilingual or bicultural writers and the shock mirroring brings about to immigrant characters is “more obvious or more sudden and therefore more clearly dramatized than the conventional bildungsroman or metaphoric journey of process through the stages of life, maturation and self-realization” (Oster 35-36). Like Lacan, Oster also thinks that the mirror image can’t authentically be the image of the self. It is “[an illusion] of wholeness” because it is just a “‘prepared’ face that conceals who and what a person really is” (38). This prepared face serves two functions: one is to satisfy others, since in Lacan’s words, desire “is born in the field of the Other” (188). Another function is to hide the true self from the Other.

The application of Lacan’s Mirror Stage to ethnic female autobiography subverts Gusdorf’s individualistic model. The premise of Gusdorf’s individualistic model is that the author’s identity is autonomous, everything but her self should be excluded from the discourse. As a matter of fact, every identity is relational instead of autonomous. We understand ourselves based on our awareness of the Other, which stands for an existing social order we subject to. The embodiment of the Other could be people who live in the same social order but are in some way different, who are more ready to conform to social norms and hence more accepted in the larger society. Those who are more excluded from the society will have a stronger awareness of the existence of the Other. Ethnic women, due to their double marginal social statuses, have a tremendous sense of the self-and-the-Other relationship in their lives, and their subjectivity is developed in interaction with the Other. Thus ethnic women writers are writing under the gaze of the Other, which is basically the way they feel the existence of their selves.

The growing-up of the protagonists in Wong's and Kingston's autobiographies is much akin to the mirror stage of the child in Lacan's Mirror Theory, who, after suddenly seeing his reflected image in the mirror, begins to think about her relation to others. After examining the plot of both books, I find that the protagonists' internal trauma, although differing from each other, both start at a certain point of their life with a sudden realization of their different ethnic and gender identities as social markers given by the American mainstream society as well as by their own communities. For example, Wong is awakened by the three-day celebration of the birth of her brother, the only son of her parents, to the fact that "she herself was a girl and, like her younger sister, unalterably less significant than the new son in their family" (27). Kingston uses "black" to describe her childhood experience of having to learn to speak English in kindergarten, her incapability to speak English raises her consciousness of her ethnic identity: she belongs to a community that exists in a larger society that she does not belong to; and the despair has thereafter led to her silence in school: "[m]y silence was thickest—total—during the three years that I cover my school paintings with black paint. I painted layers of black over houses and flowers and suns" (165). Wong and Kingston undergo their whole adolescence being cognizant of their gender and ethnic differences, having to deal with shocks they experience when being treated differently. This consciousness of difference is integral to comprehending of their narrators' identity development, and it is, so to speak, the engine that pushes their plots forward.

Lacan's concept of difference is tightly bound up with two associated concepts: desire and Lack. The distance between the subject's image in the eyes of the Other and his own authentic self makes her realize what she does not have, and motivates her

interminable desire to attain what she lacks in the hope to measure up to the expectations of the Other. Lacan notes that desire and Lack “provide the structure for human psyche,” who we are is determined by “*manque à être*” (or want-to-be) (29). This desire, nonetheless, can’t be simply understood as our own desire, but something that relates us to the Other. As Lacan puts it, “man’s desire is the desires of the Other” (38). Lacan also notes that in language communication Lack and difference makes possible the dialogue, “What I seek in speech is the response of the Other. What constitutes me as subject is my question” (86). Such a Lacanian point of view can help us better explore the relationship between the subject and the Other, and is very useful to analyze the situations of ethnic group members. In a Lacanian sense, the purpose of autobiography is not only to represent the self, but also is an inter-subjective communication between the speaker and the imagined Other. It helps us to look at how speech is created based on the speaker’s desire for success in mainstream society and freedom from the community’s restrictions as well as the speaker’s desire to speak in order to gain recognition by the Other.

While the Lacanian concept of desire exhibits a structural relationship to narrative, other theorists also recognize the relevance of desire to narrative. Teresa de Lauretis argues that narrative is always a question of desire. Peter Brooke considers desire as the “motor force” to push forward the narrative plot. However, these references to desire are not well-defined and seem too broad. Lacan’s concept desire connects the subject with the Other and is more applicable to account for the constitution of subjectivity. Literary theorist Martin MaQuillan perceives this inter-subjectivity in narrativity as “the subject’s appeal to the Other in speech and the inadequate response of the Other to that call” (16). In the case of ethnic female writers, the act of

autobiographical writing must deal with the anticipated response of the Other; therefore, autobiography is more than something that tells us what happened, from an alternative point of view, it is what it meant to that individual to grow up ethnic in the American context. The examination of the inter-subjectivity enables us to see how much the implied author deviates from the paradigm that is evidence of conformity to stereotypes.

Like Bakhtin, Lacan also asserts the importance of language in understanding the world. The transition from infancy to childhood that Lacan's mirror stage specifies is his transition from a world lacking of differentiation to one full of differences, limitations, and boundaries, the former termed by Lacan as the *Real* or the *Imaginary*, the latter the *Symbolic*. The *Real* is a world at a time when the child feels no difference, limitations or boundaries. The sense of wholeness continues until the child experiences his Mirror Stage and then enters the Symbolic where he feels difference and limitations everywhere. What really pushes the child to achieve his entry into the Symbolic, according to Lacan, is language, which is indispensable for him to adapt to the norms in the Symbolic order.

French psychoanalyst and feminist scholar Julia Kristeva has developed this idea by substituting the *Real* and *Imaginary* with the *semiotic* and the capitalized *Symbolic* with *symbolic*. Kristeva acknowledges language's pivotal role in the child's subjectivity construction and his accession into the symbolic order. The emphasis on the importance of language implies that language is instrumental in the signification system of the symbolic order and the language competence may affect a person's performance in that society. Language inadequacy will cause a person's misunderstanding or confusion about



the laws of the society, which will eventually make his or her acculturation difficult or even impossible.

While Lacan is more concerned about the passage of the mirror stage, Kristeva points out that the prelinguistic semiotic world is equally important to the child's subjectivity because it is associated with a world lacking of differentiation between self and others, a world that he/she can more comfortably or easily identify with. Kristeva emphasizes the coexistence of the semiotic and the symbolic and the constant interaction between them. Kristeva argues that "the subject is always both semiotic and symbolic," and the interplay between them makes a model that can be used to explore the author's creativity (92-93). This model is demonstrated by ethnic bildungsromane, with their representations of the complicated relationship between the individuals, their communities, and the mainstream society. The mirror theory lends us the perspective to look at how the psyche of an ethnic autobiographer in a multicultural society is formed in between the dominant culture and his/her own cultural heritage. Therefore, he/she should not be considered as the single source of meaning as the individualistic model advocates, and the meaning should be generated from the communication between self and the Other.

Both Bakhtin and Lacan hold that when we speak, we are not speaking our own language. To Bakhtin, we are just rephrasing what has been previously said by others. Lacan thinks we are using the language of the *Symbolic* order. Lacan also links language with identity: since language is necessary for the entry into the *Symbolic*, identity is essentially a linguistic construct. Or we can say, it is socially constructed because it is

constructed in interaction instead of originating in ourselves, and it always depends on others. This point is much alike to Bakhtin's dialogism. More significantly, Lacan provokes us to deeper thinking: What is the world of the *Real* exactly like? Since it is a world with no language, as a matter of fact we are not able to access it. The language of the *Symbolic* is not able to describe that world where we only have impressions, drives, or desires. Lacan and some other psychoanalysts leave the undescrivable *Real* to the register of the unconscious. In literary discourses, how to represent the unconsciousness remains a challenging task.

Lacan's theory of Mirror Stage is revolutionary in the eyes of many critics. It posits that psychological activities do not occur in a social vacuum—what we think is often a function of what other people think and do. It denies biological determinism and gives social meaning to mental activities. Lacan's emphasis on the dialogue between self and society is inspiring to feminist literary studies. As Gallop notes, Lacan tends to “promote a ‘feminist’ anti-logocentric discourse [...] refusing to assert conclusions or establish truth” (Mcquillan 16). Taking its inspiration from Lacan and Kristeva, I see a given society in psychoanalytic terms and look at the social dimensions of individual consciousness. Lacan's psychoanalytic model calls our attention to the crucial role the dynamics of social system plays in the psychic life of ethnic women who struggle to settle between two different cultures. It is especially useful in helping to interpret Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, which has come under a lot of criticism for not following the genre tradition of factual delineation and chronological narration. Lacking overall coherence, *The Woman Warrior* is like a collage made up of family history, personal stories, and myths. But looking from a Lacanian perspective, it is not difficult

for the reader to figure out a thread running through all the chapters, that is, the protagonist's racial and gender consciousness in the process of her growing up ethnic in America.

Most significantly, Lacan's emphasis on the dialogue between individual and society can hence be invoked to theorize the conflict between social ideologies and the desires of individuals who are susceptible to the power of former. When the child enters the Symbolic via the Mirror Stage, the Symbolic has already had its own language and reason by which its ideologies are expressed. In the process of language learning, some of the child's desires will be repressed in order for her to adapt. Autobiographical writing in this sense is not just writing about what happened. It is the author's act of encoding social ideologies into incidents according to her own needs and desires. Actually underlying all the social inequality we can always find Lack and then the desire to fill in that Lack.

As a resemblance of the larger society, an ethnic female autobiography makes itself a microcosm where the same model can be applied to the characters' inner conflicts with the culture of their external world. The inner conflicts indicate repressed desires, which are not only psychologically but also politically powerful because they come from the consciousness of Lack and are always seeking ways to expressing themselves, whether directly or indirectly.

The political potential of Lacan's theory is inspiring to feminist literary studies and has often been used to critique patriarchal order. Jane Gallop, a scholar in women's studies, notes that Lacan tends to "promote a 'feminist' auto-logocentric discourse[...]refusing to assert conclusions or establish truth" (Mcquillan 16). To me,

Kristeva's view on the relationship between the symbolic and semiotic is more specific about how opposite dynamics are at work. Kristeva particularly points out that literature offers the possibility of the revolutionary in the symbolic order which often suppresses the underlying heterogeneity of language and identity, yet its superiority is frequently threatened by the semiotic. The female author's consciousness of the power of the semiotic is manifest in the way she represents its heterogeneity, which arises from her desire to present a self image different from the one in the eyes of the Other.

Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism and heteroglossia attaches a lot of importance to the context in which the writer is writing and disprove the idea that writing self can be purely private and isolated. According to Bakhtin, we cannot "treat any of these forms in isolation from the means for its contextualized (dialogizing) framing" (340). Therefore, whether the author is aware or not, at the moment of writing, she is having a dialogue with others. From a Bakhtinian point of view, writing in a heteroglossia world is the writer joining in "[a]nother's discourse, when introduced into a speech context, enters the speech that frames it not in mechanical bond but in a chemical union semantic and emotional experience level" (340). Lacan also admits the existence of intersubjectivities and thinks that it is the foundation of the speaker's subjectivity; as he says, "What I seek in speech is the response of the other, what constitutes me as subject is my question" (86). This commonality that makes it imperative to Bakhtin and Lacan for the interpretation of ethnic female autobiography.

Furthermore, Lacan's theory serves as a supplement to Bakhtin's theory because the question of what exactly stimulates the author's interaction with her society is

unanswered by Bakhtin; his theory is not based on psychoanalysis after all. To make up for this inadequacy, Lacan's theory well explains where the author's desire comes from, "[s]peech is based on the idea of lack" (29). It is the author's practical social lack that has awakened her consciousness of the prevalent social difference and then created her desire to speak and hence provide fodder for our discussion of the structure of human psyche as well as the rhetoric in ethnic female autobiography. The concept of *desire* and its associated concepts *Lack* and *difference* also provides the angle for the discussion of ethnic women's identity because according to Lacan, who we are is determined by desire (Lacan's "manqu'á etre" or want-to-be). In other words, the gap between what I want to be and what I really am is central to the discussion of ethnic women's autobiographical writing. Thus a Lacanian model is perhaps the best way to interpret the rhetorical structure of ethnic female autobiography.

Therefore, Bakhtin's dialogism and heteroglossia, Lacan's theory of Mirror Stage and some related other concepts serve my intention to do a sociohistorical as well as a psychological interpretation of Wong's and Kingston's autobiographies. In exploring the rhetoric of the two books, I anatomize how Chinese-American characters' psychic life is constructed between the dialects of their socially marginalized culture and the majority society. Looking beyond that, I place a premium on the interactions between the author's self and her society and probe the political dimension of Wong's and Kingston's autobiographical writing. In examining the major literary and rhetoric devices used by Wong and Kingston to represent growing up in America, my real intention is to find the narrative rationale behind each book that probably stems from the author's consciousness

of institutionalized discrimination and how she uses her autobiographies as a tool to effectively dialog with the society she lives in.

Lacan's and Kristeva's theories about the Mirror Stage, the concepts of difference, Lack, desire, the semiotic and the symbolic are very explanatory in my narratological analysis. The ethnic female autobiography begs to be recast as a narrative of female desire generated by human discrepancies. This desire manifests itself in the rhetoric of both *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *The Woman Warrior*. There remain key issues to be addressed: how the consciousness of the different ethnic and gender roles in her "mirror stage" has a formative impact on the protagonist's mental growth; how the protagonist's psyche is constructed out of the interplay of the semiotic and the symbolic when she passes from one to the other; and how the narrative plot is built upon the protagonist's realization of social castration and is pushed forward by their desire to attain what they lack. Both Bakhtin and Lacan lend a feminist insight into further discussion. Wong's unawakened female consciousness largely accounts for her conformity to the accepted standards of her time in terms of form as well as rhetoric, which prevents us from seeing clearly the nature of her living circumstances and her true sense of self. On the other hand, however, examining some stylist innovations, such as the use of Chinese myth, nonchronological narrative, Chinese talk-story etc., can show how the social and cultural movements such as the Civil Rights Movement, various women's movements, and postmodernism have inspired Maxine Hong Kingston. I argue that these literary strategies function to represent the difference of the protagonist's semiotic world longtime suppressed by dominant social values, and the mixture of different cultural and literary elements in the text metaphorically manifest the dialogic

nature of American ethnic literature and culture. All these strategies have political implications because they are used to challenge the conventional unitary literary language that often subjects to an “ideological unification and centralization” (Bakhtin 271).

## CHAPTER III

### EXISTENTIAL AMBIVALENCE

Chinatown in San Francisco teems with haunting memories, for it is wrapped in the atmosphere, customs, and manners of a land across the sea. The same Pacific Ocean laves the shores of both worlds, a tangible link between old and new, past and present, Orient and Occident.

—Jade Snow Wong

The vicissitudes of Chinatown as the dwelling place of Chinese American community amount to the exact timeline of contemporary Chinese-American history, and make the backdrop that many Chinese-American autobiographies set against. Reading Chinese-American autobiographies is one way to read how the writers inscribe themselves into the Chinese-American history. Both *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *The Woman Warrior* are situated in the Chinatown of San Francisco. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a great many Chinese immigrants came and settled here with a dream of wealth and a better life, hence the gradual formation of this culturally distinct community in their host country. Like Chinatowns in many other American cities, it has become a nexus of social relationships among its generations of residents. Chinatown plays a vital role in the Chinese American's ethos that Wong and Kingston attempt to capture in their texts. It is by virtue of this ethos that both writers strive to integrate their personal experience into a continuous and coherent history.

The Chinatown Wong depicts at the opening of *Fifth Chinese Daughter* calls our attention to the dichotomies that give us a clue to an existential ambivalence between the



two worlds Chinese immigrants live in. As a matter of fact, this ambivalence characterizes all ethnic immigrants' acculturation and their offspring's growing up experience. Since Wong's and Kingston's books, as well as many other ethnic autobiographies with growing up ethnic in the American context as a dominant theme, give much more weight to the protagonist's childhood and adolescence than their adulthood, perhaps "ethnic autobiographical bildungsroman" is a more accurate categorization for them. The dilemma of being trapped in between two cultures for many years is deeply etched in ethnic writers' minds, it also accounts for some noticeably similar rhetorical aspects of their narratives.

Ethnic minority children often have a strong sense of being outsiders not only to the bigger society but even to their own group. As the second-generation immigrants, almost all of them have experienced cultural conflicts between that of mainstream society and that of their parents. Their identity sensitivity stems mainly from their awareness of their minority status in the larger society and yet is heightened by the first-generation immigrants' hostile attitude toward American culture. In *the Woman Warrior*, Brave Orchid even calls her America-born children "ghosts" because they "[have] been born among ghosts, were taught by ghosts, and were [them]selves ghost-like"(183). Possibly this further estrangement is the reason many white readers try in vain to understand ethnic writers' motives for their autobiographical writing. Lacan's views of identity formation, which posits that one's identity is constructed in interaction with the Other, will methodically deconstruct in this body of literature the protagonists' conflicting attitudes toward their ethnic communities and the mainstream society. Lacan considers the mirror stage as the matrix of an individual's ego and hence greatly informs our

understanding of his or her subjectivity. To second-generation immigrants, whose growing up means remaining confronted with and reconciling two different cultures, the duality of their cultural identities is actually a reflection of psychic identifications that grapple and sometimes get lost between the two cultures. The shocks mirroring brings about in ethnic bildungsroman are thus supposed to be more complicated and impactful than other types of bildungsroman. Furthermore, the emotional loss after the shock is even more poignant, the protagonist's metamorphosis from innocence to maturation is therefore supposed to be more dramatic. In looking at how Wong and Kingston adopt the bildungsroman to express the experience of minority groups in American society, we can generalize from it a model of the textual construction of Chinese-American female subjectivities.

In ethnic female bildungsromane, the mirror stage usually takes place when the girls are several years old and lasts until their adolescence. The two major kinds of shock they experience during this period of time are caused by their awareness of their gender and ethnic identities. Growing up in life circumstances steeped with Chinese patriarchal customs, stories, and points of view, Chinese female autobiographers' shock related to their gender roles often comes before their ethnic awareness, which they will not possess until they step out of their communities. The gendered relationship between self and the Other in their texts often originates from their experience as a young child, when they are first shocked and upset by adults' prejudice toward them and influenced by its hurtful effect for the rest of their life. The nature of this prejudice, as they realize later, is nothing but the patriarchal sexist equation of physiological difference with inferiority. In *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, Jade Snow doesn't feel how differently her parents treat their

daughters and the only Son Forgiveness from Heaven until, after a feast is held to celebrate the birth of the son, she overhears one of her elder sisters tell a relative:

“[t]his joyfulness springs only from the fact that the child is at last a son, after three daughters born in the fifteen years between Blessing from Heaven and him. When Jade Precious Stone was born before him, the house was quiet. There was no such display.” (27)

Later in that evening, Jade Snow feels so upset by what her sister says:

Under the comfortable warmth of her covers, Jade Snow turned over restlessly, trying to grasp the full meaning of that remark. Forgiveness from Heaven, because he was a brother, was more important to Mama and Daddy than dear baby sister Precious Stone, who was only a girl. But even more uncomfortable was the realization that she herself was a girl and, like her younger sister, unalterably less significant than the new son in their family. (27).

For the first time, Jade Snow begins to think about the status of women in her culture and her own gender identity, the truth is unpleasant and irrevocably changes her view on her life ever since.

There is a similar scene in Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* where Kingston's Third Grand-Uncle at last has got a great-grandson, his only great-grandson. All the villagers are invited to the celebration that lasts for a full month. To more clearly compare men and women's statuses in a Chinese family, Kingston also portrays an old misogynist who calls girls “maggots” and at every meal he will shout, “Maggot! Where are my grandsons? I want grandsons! Give me grandsons! Maggots!” (191).

The contemptuous attitudes and remarks toward women have actually never been scarce in Maxine's life, such as “[t]here's no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls,” “[f]eeding girls is feeding cowbirds,” “when you raise girls, you're raising children for strangers,” etc. (46). Surprisingly, these words mostly come out of women's mouths.

To ethnic minority children, shocks come from both their own culture and the culture of the larger society. Wong tells from her early memories her first experience with an American turkey. She is so frightened by the turkey that she ends up being sick for days and has had to sleep with her mother. Wong also tells how embarrassed she becomes when she is embraced by her American teacher because it is not the way Chinese people comfort others.

The shock coming from ethnic children's encounters with American culture is even more vehement. Having stepped out of their own communities, they have to face a more inhospitable world. It is hard for them to survive in such a hegemonic society, especially when the biggest challenge is their English. Kingston recalls how difficult it is when Maxine begins to learn to speak English in kindergarten:

A dumbness--a shame--still cracks my voice in two, even when I want to say “hello” casually, or ask an easy question in front of the check-out counter, or ask directions of a bus driver. I stand frozen, or I hold up the line with the complete, grammatical sentence that comes squeaking out at impossible length. “What did you say?” says the cab driver, or “Speak up,” so I have to perform again, only weaker the second time. A telephone call makes my day makes my throat bleed and takes up that day's courage.

It spoils my day with self-disgust when I hear my broken voice come skittering out into the open. It makes people wince to hear it. (165)

Maxine finds this learning experience humiliating; she becomes silent, the incapability to speak English is described by her as “black.” As I identified in the previous chapter, she writes, “[m]y silence was thickest—total—during during the three years that I cover my school paintings with black paint. I painted layers of black over houses and flowers and suns.” (165).

In Lacan’s mirror stage, after a series of initial shocks the subject will go through a long psychological crisis. Her inner peace has been shattered by the loss of the identification with her surroundings, with a sense of alienation and ambivalence ensuing. Now she is faced with the task of redefining himself, trying in vain to find back a unifying self. This mental process is applicable to all racialized characters, although the focus on second generation immigrants growing up in America is a crucial one because all of them have experienced racism in their interactions with the dominant White culture.

After the mirror stage, now the child's life is filled with more and more events that make her think about differences. Jade Snow learns from her father that “it was not worth while to invest in their daughters' book education” (14), “Going to college is not necessary for girls” (20); her mother on the other hand teaches her how to be a domestic girl by “discourag[ing] physically active games as unbecoming for girls” and “mak[ing] her sit down to embroider bureau scarves” (20). The different goals for girls and boys in family education at first confuse Jade Snow. In her later interactions with her American teachers, she begins to make comparisons and comes to realize that her family education may have something to do with different gender roles in Chinese culture:

she was now conscious that “foreign” American ways were not only generally and vaguely different from their Chinese ways, but that they were specifically difference, and the specific differences would involve a choice of action. Jade Snow had begun to compare American ways with those of her mother and father, and the comparison made her uncomfortable. (21)

There is no true isolation living in Chinatown. Jade Snow often reads American newspapers, and she is familiar with “Bringing Up Father,” “Dick Tracy,” and “The Katzen-jammer Kids” (21). She also often goes to “foreign” movies with her family. Kingston recalls in her book an interesting argument between Maxine and her mother about how an eclipse happens. Her mother explains it as a frog swallowing the moon, so she should “slam pot lids together to scare the frog from swallowing the moon” as people in Old China did (169). Yet Maxine learns a different explanation from American culture, “[t]hat's just a shadow the earth makes when it comes between the moon and the sun” (169). Maxine is also a critical observer of Chinese culture from an American perspective. For example, the typical Chinese way of greeting people is “Have you eaten rice today?” The polite answer should be “Yes, I have. Thank you.” An honest reply such as “No, I haven't” is not expected. However, Maxine prefers the American way of being honest, “I'm starved. Do you have any cookies? I like chocolate chip cookies” (21). She thinks being polite in a Chinese way is lying in American culture. As Jade Snow and Maxine's childhood experiences demonstrate, growing up in the Chinatown is actually growing up in two cultures. Ethnic children are exposed to a bicultural environment since a very early age, even before they truly recognize or realize themselves.

Wong's bicultural perspective helps her invent an interesting father figure who is set apart from other first generation immigrants in Asian-American literature. He was a faithful believer in Confucianism back in the mainland of China. But his American experience has changed his belief and he has converted to Christianity. He learns English at night school, organizes the family to study the Bible. His efforts are rewarded and he is ordained a minister eventually. Wong's father seems to exemplify the realization of the American Dream through hard work which is so unusual among first generation Chinese immigrants who reject learning English and assimilating into American culture. With no more information in this chapter, Wong simply ascribes her father's achievements to Christianity that has "revolutionized his traditional Chinese thinking" (72). Under the influence of her father's religious conversion, Wong's family life seems to be much easier than imagined. Due to the father's willingness to receive religions from two cultures, the generational conflicts we often see in ethnic families are far less intense in Wong's: "Daddy became as serious about Christian precepts as he was intent on Confucian propriety. It was a blend which was infused into all his children" (73).

Although it normally takes long for the shocks from the mirror stage to subside, the children may gradually learn to settle with the duality of their lives and their cultural identities, as Kingston puts:

I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes. Pearls are bone marrow; pearls come from oysters. The dragon lives in the sky, ocean, marshes, and mountains; and the mountains are also its cranium. Its voice thunders and jingles like copper

pans. It breathes fire and water; and sometimes the dragon is one, sometimes many. (29)

In my opinion, the ethnic female bildungsroman expresses something more than assimilative narrative; it should express the unique quality of its characters' mind, not just the sense of duality, but also the sense of being the Other in an unfamiliar cultural context. Through the act of reading, individuals can try to identify with the mind of this group of people who are often treated as outsiders of white society. The problematic relationship between self and the Other intertwined with the sense of duality may lead us go deeper into the psychology of a society covered with the flag of “the American Dream.”

Ethnic people's racial and cultural duality is usually caused by their migrancy, but this duality that both Wong and Kingston experience and depict is called by white Americans racial and cultural “schizophrenia.” Given this background, duality in ethnic literature has become an insulting label ethnic nationalists often attack. African-American scholar W. E. B. Du Bois terms this sense of duality “double consciousness” in *the Soul of Black Folk* and uses it to describe African-American psyche. According to Du Bois, double consciousness refers to:

a sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (215)



Du Bois' definition implies that double consciousness is not something particular to African Americans; it characterizes the psyche of all the hyphenated Americans. The self-and-the-Other relationship explicated in this definition can also be adapted to Lacan's mirror theory. Scholar of African American Studies Werner Sollars also notes the relevance of double consciousness to mirroring, "Double-consciousness characters may be attracted to mirrors, reflecting windows, or smooth-surfaced ponds" (249). The social implication of ethnic literature is that it "holds a mirror to the mainstream, implying that the latter may have things to learn from both African Americans and Jewish American—and because of the way the lessons are packaged, the content proves to be similar" (Japtok 156). In light of this, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *The Woman Warrior* absolutely promote the critical reading of how Wong and Kingston self-consciously deal with their gendered or racialized relationships with the mainstream through scrutinizing in their texts the gap between self and the Other.

Accordingly, the most effective ethnic literature is basically concerned about those who are marginalized from the dominant culture and therefore identified as the Other. Due to the hegemonic attitude of the dominant culture, the Other is little understood, and is often essentialized and stereotyped in pop culture. Resenting the stereotyping of Asian Americans, Kingston comments, "[t]o say we are inscrutable, mysterious, exotic denies us our common humanness, because it says that we are so different from a regular human being that we are by our nature intrinsically unknowable" ("Cultural Mis-readings" 57).

*Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *The Woman Warrior* resemble each other in terms of the portrayal of family power structures. There are two major power relations in Chinese-American families: one is the man-woman relationship, the other is the parent-child relationship. The relationship between self and the Other is especially prominent in both of these types of relationships. Ethnic girls have the most poignant sense of being the Other because they are in the subordinate position of both power relations. Some scholars recommend reading Wong and Kingston using generational conflicts as a point of view, which I think in essence is the interpretation of the relationship between self and the Other existing in family dynamics. Wong's and Kingston's narrators either look on themselves as the Other of the family or look on their parents as the Other to their inner world.

Both Wong and Kingston narrate how their parents teach their children by punishing them. Perhaps punishing is a way to secure their dominant position in the family. Children are not allowed to ask questions. Maybe they think asking questions means questioning their authority. "[Life] was a constant puzzle," Wong tells us. "No one ever troubled to explain. Only through punishment did she learn that what was proper was right and what was improper was wrong" (3). Wong describes the father's reactions when Jade Snow asks questions: "At first she asked questions, being curious. But her father did not like questions. He said that one was not supposed to talk when one was either eating or thinking, and when one was not eating, one should be thinking" (4). Wong also gives a bitter example of being punished by her mother for having been spat on by a boy. "Mother did not sympathize but reproved her, saying that she must have spit

on her playmate first or he wouldn't have spit on her" (3). Despite Jade Snow's mother's ridiculous logic, since she is the person in power, Jade Snow has to accept it.

Kingston describes the same parenting style. Young Maxine's parents "never explained anything that was really important," and therefore the children "no longer asked" (121). She continues to complain:

You get no warning that you shouldn't wear a white ribbon in your hair until they hit you and give you the sideways glare for the rest of the day... You figure out what you got hit for and don't do it again if figured correctly. I don't see how they kept up a continuous culture for five thousand years. Maybe they didn't; maybe everyone makes it up as they go along. If we had to depend on being told, we'd have no religion, no babies, no menstruation (sex, of course, unspeakable), no death. (215)

This unique parenting style has deprived the children of the sense of being a member of traditional culture, and forces them to embody all their life experiences as the Other. Furthermore, the stereotyping of the first-generation Asian Americans has complicated the generational conflicts, which makes the communication between parents and children even more difficult. Whether at home or in the mainstream society, ethnic children often see themselves as the Other or construct their identities through their relationship to the Other.

If subjectivity is (mis)construed in interaction with the Other, when a racial character has experienced her mirror stage, she comes to understand her social and racial marginality, and then begins to develop a split and conflicting subjectivity resulting from her double consciousness. For many ethnic writers this subjectivity and rhetorical

consciousness bleeds out in their bildungsromane, which is true when we look at how Wong and Kingston represent family and social dynamics in their works. Their divided consciousness engenders their quest for a suitable voice for themselves to relate personal history and articulate Asian American female subjectivity in a nationalistic and patriarchal rhetoric—a voice that they think would properly redefine themselves.

Besides alienation permeating their bildungsromane, both Wong and Kingston call attention to the issue of speech and silence that are very common among ethnic people. Kingston is also aware of the serious consequences of Asian Americans' silences: the invisibility of Asian American people and their cultures. In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston details many kinds of silences, her narrator Maxine associating silence with inability to assimilate when she finds another girl who is silent too and unpopular. The silent girl makes her imagine that she herself must also have an unpopular public image. Later on, Maxine notices that “[t]he other Chinese girls did not talk either,” and she decides “the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl” (166). In *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine emphasizes the importance of the ability to speak, as she tells the silent girl in the kindergarten, “If you don't talk...you can't have a personality...You've got to let people know you have a personality and a brain” (164). Maxine takes this belief to extreme, adding that “talking and not talking made the difference between sanity and insanity” because “[i]nsane people were the ones who couldn't explain themselves” (186). To support her argument, she gives some examples of women in her life: the silent woman next door who doesn't have any children; Crazy Mary who comes to America from China and can't speak English; and Pee-A-Nah, “the village idiot, the public one” (186). All these people have problems talking. They're like mirrors reflecting the society's ideology

of language and social identity. Maxine is scared of them; she's afraid she doesn't have her own personality and will become insane like them.

But is being silent really a characteristic of Chinese-American people? Kingston tells the other side of the story: Chinese are generally very loud in public, contradicting the impression they have left upon westerners. Maxine is confused by this paradox, “[h]ow strange that the emigrants villagers are shouters, hollering face to face. My father asks, ‘Why is it I can hear Chinese from blocks away? Is it that I understand the language? Or is it they talk loud?’”(171). If we look at this paradox by examining the individual's relationship to society, it should be a matter of cultural difference: American culture encourages individualism while Chinese culture is a collectivistic culture where individuals are not expected to speak independently. As Maxine notes, the silent Chinese children in America school “screamed and yelled during recess” when they go to the Chinese school (167). In Chinese schools, they read in unison, “chanted together, voices rising and falling,...everybody reading together, reciting together and not alone with one voice” (167). Interestingly, the new teacher of the Chinese school prefers to have students stand up and read aloud one by one. At once students behave just like they do in the American school. Maxine remembers that when she is singled out to read, she is like what she is in the American school, “the same voice came out, a crippled animal running on broken legs” (167).

Another reason for Chinese-American people's silence is they are unable to articulate in a new foreign environment due to their inability to speak English, perhaps silence is an escape from being humiliated. Maxine's story of her mother cutting her frenum (the fold on the underside of the tongue) indicates that, although she is too old to

master English, she knows the importance of speaking in this country. As if exiling her own tongue, the mother hopes her daughter will make a difference and be able to fit into American society. So she tells Maxine, “I cut it so that you would not be tongue-tied. Your tongue would be able to move in any language. You'll be able to move in any language. You'll be able to speak languages that are completely different from one another. You'll be able to pronounce anything.” (164).

In Wong's and Kingston's texts, silence in public is both gendered and racialized. But *Fifth Chinese Daughter* demonstrates that within a family, being silent shows the subordinates' respect for the authority of the dominant. Children don't talk in front of their parents. Jade Snow is taught by her father, “one did not dispute one's father if one were a dutiful girl taught to act with propriety” (4). The wife doesn't talk first to other people when her husband is present. One day, when Jade Snow walks in street with her family, they meet an acquaintance; her father talks with that man, but her mother's reaction is to “remain absolutely silent” (49). Wong suggests that in the Chinese classroom, respectful students don't ask questions. Asking questions will be regarded as a way of challenging the authority of the teacher. Despite all these taboos, Wong still buttresses the idea of “speak[ing] out for what they believe is right” and “speaking out forthrightly and fearless for what he believed was right, no matter what everyone else thought” (65). Jade Snow has learned the importance of speaking out from an incident at school and it helps her win a victory in her confrontation with her Chinese teacher. Among many girls who pass a note during an exam, she is the only one being caught guilty by the teacher. For the first time in her life, Jade Snow protests and says, “[i]f you whip me, you should also have

here all the girls form my row, with their palms outstretched. And I won't hold out my hand until I see theirs held out also!" (64).

The privileging of Chinese culture is manifest not only in Wong's selection of subject matters and details, but also in her narrative methods. Writing autobiography in the third person has obviously flouted the generic convention. Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* has garnered a lot negative criticism because of this. Wong explains that she uses the third person out of a "Chinese habit" of "modesty" or humility, conforming to the tradition of the "submergence of the individual" (xiii). Readers who don't know about Chinese culture will find it difficult to accept Wong's explanation. However, Kingston's description of Maxine's psychology as an English beginner sheds light on the cultural difference concerning this issue:

The Chinese "I" has seven strokes, intricacies. How could the American "I," assuredly wearing a hat like the Chinese, have only three strokes, the middle so straight? Was it out of politeness that this writer left off strokes the way a Chinese has to write her own name small and crooked? No, it was not politeness; "I" is a capital and "you" is lower-case. (167)

Wong's reluctance to use the first person is the right reaction under this particular circumstance, especially in a culture in which "slave" used to be what women commonly called themselves. Then it's not difficult to speculate why autobiography has never existed as a genre in Chinese literary history. Considering that Asian-American women in Wong's era still lack of an assertive subjectivity, the fact that she has already taken a big step in adopting a western art form, the use of the third person may represent reconciliation between Chinese and American culture.

As the use of the third person in the *Fifth Chinese Daughter* is a distinct stylistic feature, in *The Woman Warrior* the unconventional strategy receiving widespread criticism is Kingston's rewriting of talk-stories and folklores she has heard from her mother. There are altogether five chapters in this book consisting of five unrelated stories. The first story is about the narrator's aunt called by her No Name Woman, who disgraces her family by committing adultery and giving birth to an illegitimate child when her husband has gone to America. No one in the family wants to talk about her or mention her name; the second story "White Tiger" is the rewriting of the folklore of Fa Mu Lan. It is Maxine's own fantasy of how she is living the life of Fa Mu Lan, learning martial arts from an old couple on the mountains of White Tiger in order to join the army and save her husband and brother from the enemies; the third story Shaman is the personal history of the narrator's mother Brave Orchid who used to be treated as a shaman in her village because she was a good doctor with a medical degree of midwifery and at the same time she had the magic to scare away ghosts. This chapter seems to be closer to Maxine's real life, but it is still not real nonfictional history since it is based on Brave Orchid's talk-stories; we can't tell if she is telling the truth or not. In the fourth story, "At the Western Palace," in order to encourage her sister from China Moon Orchid to confront her husband in America and win him back from another woman, Brave Orchid tells two stories: one is about an Emperor with four wives, who was imprisoned at the Western Palace by the Empress of the West and then was rescued by the Empress of the East; another she tells is about one of her brothers, whose wife forces him to build a second house for her and her children when she finds that he marries another woman in Singapore. This chapter is written in the third person, and Maxine is not even present



when her mother tells those stories. All the details of the stories she knows from her sister, whose version is also not original because she learns from the brother who is then with Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid. The last story, “A Song for Barbarian Reed Pipe,” is the story of a poetess in ancient China, Ts'ai Ye who is captured, at the age of 20, by a chieftain of the South Hsiung-nu and has been his wife for twelve years. Twelve years later, she brings back with her the music of Hsiung-nu and writes “Eighteen Stanza for a Barbarian Reed Pipe.” The words are translated from the language of Hsiung-nu and become popular among Chinese people. In this chapter, Ts'ai Ye's story is intertwined with Maxine's American experience, indicating the bicultural nature of her life. Like Ts'ai Ye, when she is writing, she imagines she is translating her two cultures into a comprehensible language for her readers from different cultural backgrounds.

When talking about why talk-story is so frequently used in her book, Kingston tells us:

Whenever she had to warn us about life, my mother told stories that ran like this one, a story to grow up on. She tested our strength to establish realities. Those in the emigrant generations who could not reassert brute survival died young and far from home. Those of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants build around our childhoods fits in solid America. (5)

Identification is an important part of oral storytelling because listeners' experiences may parallel the teller's. At the opening of the book, Brave Orchid explains why she wants to tell Maxine the story of No Name Woman, “Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don't humiliate us. You wouldn't like to be

forgotten as if you had never been born. The villagers are watchful” (5). To her, this is a cautionary tale for Maxine which is educating rather than entertaining. She attempts to imbue her daughter with traditional Chinese feminine virtues, setting a standard for Maxine's American life. It is one of the stories Maxine “grow up on,” exerting great influence on her female subjectivity so much so that she calls her aunt “my forerunner,” perhaps that's why she puts her story at the opening of her bildungsroman (5). No Name Woman's story has caused Maxine's anxieties and fear of sexuality and has hindered her socialization with boys. In order to keep distance from boys who take a fancy to her, she adds the title “brother” before boys' names, which indicates the sister-brother relationship between Maxine and them in Chinese culture. As a result, she has no dates. She describes her anxieties about sexuality as “atavism” in fear of what happens to No Name Woman will happen to her.

Kingston's use of talk-story in her bildungsroman seems to signal her embrace of her Chinese heritage and her bicultural identity. As a writer, she has taken tremendous advantage of this traditional Chinese art form, making her bildungsroman a significant milestone in Asian-American literary history despite her absence from real Chinese culture and history. Furthermore, her American identity provides her with another perspective, which enables her to write from a bicultural viewpoint, like she says at the end of *The Woman Warrior*: “Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also talk story. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine” (206).

The theme of “the American Dream” runs through many ethnic writers' bildungsromane, which seems reasonable because it reflects much of their American

experiences. But “the American Dream” is overstated by white readers and critics so much so that this body of literature is often stereotyped by them as the individuals' success stories: an ethnic hero who overcomes all the obstacles and ends up successfully assimilating into the mainstream culture. The real attraction here as white American see it, is nothing more than the American success myth inherent in its society, which does not help us look at the characters' real personalities or desires.

Lacan's Mirror Theory and Kristeva's concepts of *semiotic* and *symbolic* provide us with a model that deconstructs how ethnic bildungsromane represent the complicated relationship between the individuals, their communities and the larger society. With this combined model, we are able to explore characters' multidimensional psyche based on the communication between self and the Other. Lacan's Mirror Stage, in Kristeva's term, is the subject's departure from the semiotic and entry into the symbolic. It is the moment when his subjectivity begins to develop. The semiotic is the prelinguistic, presocial world in which the child lives in a mother-child symbiosis, with no sense of self. Psychoanalysts point out that in the semiotic, the child has just some bodily felt experience or drives, so it is hard to delineate them with language. In *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, Wong gives a description of the life stage just before Jade Snow realizes the difference between her self and the Other, which might help us understand what the semiotic will be like:

Until she was five years old, Jade Snow's world was almost wholly Chinese for her world was her family, the Wongs. Life was secure but formal, sober but quietly happy, and the few problems she had were

entirely concerned with what was proper or improper in the behavior of a little Chinese girl. (2)

What Wong describes above obviously happens before Jade Snow's mirror stage. Jade Snow just does what she is told to do without questioning because her consciousness has not split yet, nor has she established her own subjectivity.

The pursuit of the so-called American Dream, then, from Lacan's and Kristeva's point of view, is the subject's journey toward the symbolic after she experiences the shock of her mirror stage, ends her symbiotic relationship with the culture she is familiar with and begins to acquire language. Since language is a set of tools to define social conventions, which is very instrumental in the signification system of the symbolic order, the symbolic order is basically a language-based order. To put it more specifically, the realization of the American Dream necessitates the subject to leave a world lacking of differentiation and understand all kinds of differences, limitations, constraints and boundaries defined by language. The construction of her subjectivity is always accompanied by her language learning. The subject's language learning ability to a great extent determines if or not she is able to assimilate into the mainstream society. While Jade Snow's and Maxine's experiences testify to language's power to create personal identities, their parents, however, who refuse to learn English, have completely lost the chance to enter the symbolic order of the white society.

As they grow up, the desire to enter the symbolic becomes stronger, and on the other side, the link with the semiotic weaker. This is almost universal among ethnic children. When Kingston's narrator can no longer stand the restrictions from her family, she declares, "I had to leave home in order to see the world logically, logic the new way

of seeing” (204). But, Kristeva does not mean that the semiotic would stop working upon the subject's entry into the symbolic. On the contrary, she emphasizes that the semiotic always exists in interaction with symbolic. After the mirror stage, the semiotic seems to be under the domination of the symbolic since the subject is driven by his desire to leave for the symbolic. Therefore, it is out of the dichotomy between the semiotic and the symbolic that the subject's psyche is constructed.

The intergenerational relationships in ethnic female bildungsromane are often highlighted by the American-born daughters' rebellions against their Chinese parents, especially mothers. They sometimes try to reject their own cultural heritage in order to draw a boundary between themselves and their parents. One way is to do something unconventional and unacceptable, by doing so they hope to make themselves the Other in their communities. For example, Maxine begins to behave in a weird way when she suspects that her parent is arranging to marry her to an emigrant boy:

I dropped two dishes. I found my walking stick and limped across the floor. I twisted my mouth and caught my and in the knots of my hair. I spilled soup on the FOB when I handed him his bowl. ..I raise dust swirls sweeping around and under the FOB's chair [...]. I put on my shoes with the open flaps and flapped about like a Wino Ghost. From then on, I wore those shoes to parties, whenever the mothers gathered to talk about marriages. (194)

Obviously Maxine knows about the tradition of arranged marriages, as her mother tells her, “[t]hough you can't see it...a red string around your ankle ties you to the person you'll marry. He's already been born, and he's on the other end of the string” (194). So instead

of showing explicit indignation, she chooses to be awkward and stupid before the family and the boy, because she also knows that it would be bad for her people to see her as going against their traditional definition of femininity. Maxine's fear that Chinese culture will disempower her in American life circumstances and her reactive desire to cover up her connection with her family are exposed to us in her emotional outburst in a fight with her mother, in which she tries to defend herself with American values against Chinese definition of femininity:

I'm going away anyway. I am. Do you hear me? I may be ugly and clumsy, but one thing I'm not, I'm not retarded. There's nothing wrong with my brain. Do you know what the Teacher Ghosts say about me? They tell me I'm smart, and I can win scholarships. I can get into colleges. I've already applied. I'm smart. I can do all kinds of things. I know how to get A's, and they say I could be a scientist or a mathematician if I want. I can make a living and take care of myself. So you don't have to find me a keeper who's too dumb to know a bad bargain. I'm so smart, if they say write ten pages, I can write fifteen. I can do ghost things even better than ghosts can. Not everybody thinks I'm nothing. [...] I won't let you turn me into a slave or a wife. I'm getting out of here. I can't living here anymore...I'm going to get scholarships, and I'm going away. And at college I'll have the people I like for friends. I don't care if their great-great-grandfather died of TB. I don't care if they were our enemies in China four thousand years ago. [...] And I'm not going to Chinese school anymore. I'm going to run for office at American school...And I can't

stand Chinese school anyway; [...] And I don't want to listen to any more of your stories; they have no logic. (201-02)

It is true that the symbolic has an overwhelming domination over the semiotic, but Kristeva also points out that this domination sometimes becomes very vulnerable and is likely to be overturned by the semiotic. The semiotic always exists and functions to link the subject and her cultural matrix, although it might be socially and culturally suppressed during the subject's accession into the symbolic. Given an opportunity, it can transgress the boundary and challenge the social order of the symbolic order.

Assimilationist texts stress the domination of the symbolic, regarding racialized people's endeavor to realize their American Dream as “movement from the margin haunted by race to the supposedly colorblind center of idealism” (Liu 299). As it is, hyphenated Americans with a double consciousness always experience their social mobility with a split subjectivity arising from the mirror stage and when coming into adulthood, maturation. Their attitudes toward the semiotic and the symbolic are therefore full of ambivalences, which, whether this is explicit or implicit in the text, should not be ignored or simplified by the reader.

The power of the semiotic is clearly seen in *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *The Woman Warrior*. When Jade Snow and Maxine encounter setbacks and frustrations in the outside world, or after they have gained widespread recognition from the white society, they both turn to resume their bond with their family and Chinese cultural heritage. Maxine once had a very frustrating experience in her school, falling ill and winding up hospitalized. She feels so warm about her family she used to dislike very much, telling us, “I saw no one but my family, who took good care of me...It was the best

year and half of my life” (182). Kingston also reveals in her book that one of the reasons she draws on the stories she heard from her mother is “[m]y American life has been such a disappointment” (45). Those stories have never actually happened in Kingston’s life, but they have greatly empowered her to raise herself above the struggle of her American experience.

Jade Snow, after she realizes the difference between western schooling and her family education, is also eager to leave her semiotic world for the symbolic, where she believes that she will have more freedom and agency as an independent woman. However, despite her resistance and rebellion, she still presents a picture of warm family reception at the end of the book: “And when she came home now, it was to see Mama and Daddy look up from their work, and smile at her, and say, ‘It is good to have you home again!’ ” (246). Although this scene closes Jade Snow’s story of American dream, the social mobility she has achieved through her individual hard work and perseverance is far from persuasive to resolve our skepticism about the dominant national myth. The spiritual odyssey oscillating between the semiotic and the symbolic continues, which is something unarticulated yet worth greater exploration.



## CHAPTER IV

### A WAY TO TALK BACK

Wong's and Kingston's texts are like a mirror reflecting how they are informed by the principal social ideologies such as orientalism, the American dream, and the patriarchal definition of womanhood. Insurmountable ethnic and gender differences are inherent in Wong's and Kingston's growing-up environment. Thus, how Wong and Kingston perceive the way these differences have been conceived is central to our understanding of their representations of ethnic female consciousness when they are writing as both subjects and writers.

For example, the question of silence is problematized in the opening line of *The Woman Warrior* that easily reminds us of white American stereotyping of Chinese immigrants, "You must not tell anyone" (3). Brave Orchid warns Maxine because she is going to tell Maxine an unspeakable family secret about her aunt who commits adultery and has an illegitimate daughter with a man in her village when her husband is far away laboring in America. She warns Maxine again after she finishes the story, "Don't tell anyone you had an aunt. Your father does not want to hear her name. She has never been born." (15). In the last chapter, "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," this warning reoccurs when Maxine recollects her childhood memories of talking about illegal stowaways arriving in San Francisco's Chinatown, and her parents warn their daughter never to mention her parents' immigration status to anyone, lest they be driven out of

America. “‘Don’t tell,’ advised my parents” (184). Kingston depicts a Chinatown haunted by terror—rumors are circulating that the American government will deport Chinese immigrants, and everybody is worried:

“Don’t be a fool,” somebody else would say. “It’s a trap. You go in there saying you want to straighten out your papers, they’ll deport you.”

“No, they won’t. They’re promising that nobody is going to go to jail or get deported. They’ll give you citizenship as a reward for turning yourself in, for your honesty.”

“Don’t you believe it. So-and-so trusted them, and he was deported. They deported his children too.” (184)

From this dialogue we can see that immigrants’ names have become something they keep silent about, which is very common at that time. The pervasiveness of silence among Chinese immigrants is ascribed by Maxine to the fact that every Chinese family has an unspoken secret, that “the Chinese I know hide their names; sojourners take new names when their lives change and guard their real names with silence” (6). Kingston doesn’t talk about her father’s identification in *The Woman Warrior*, but in another book, *China Men*, she discloses how her father used fake identification papers to enter America and then, fifteen years later, sent for her mother from China.

We need some sociohistorical background information to understand this kind of silence. The silence in the Chinatown and the silence of individual Chinese immigrants in Kingston’s book reflect the influence of the Chinese Exclusion Act passed by the US Congress in 1882, which specifically restricted most Chinese from entering the United States and prevented those who were already in the country from gaining citizenship. In

addition, this act discouraged the Chinese men who were already in the country from settling down and forming families; it also banned Chinese women from coming to the United States. The silence Kingston describes, as Cheung points out, “[was] reinforced by anti-Asian immigration laws” (“Imposed Silence” 163). As a result of these exclusionary laws, many Chinese who arrived in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had to do so illegally. As illegal aliens, they lived underground lives, used fake identifications, averted mentioning their immigration status to non-Chinese people and always shunned immigration authorities and the police.

The Act required that the Chinese who were in America could not re-enter the US if they went back to China to visit their family. Therefore, Chinese men in the U.S. had little chance of reuniting with their wives or of starting families in the new land. This is the social background against which the first chapter “No Name Woman” is written. Back in China, in the nineteenth century, during the declining years of the Qing Dynasty, Chinese people faced great famines, internal uprisings, and invasions of Western powers. During this tumultuous period, many Chinese left for America to find work and became cheap labor. In their eyes, America was a land that was naively thought to be full of opportunities. The first place they arrived in, San Francisco, was called by them “Gold Mountain,” and is still called “Old Gold Mountain” today by Chinese. In that era, No Name Woman’s husband, with the hope of making money, leaves his newly-wedded wife for America and has never come back. She has an affair with a young man in her village because of her husband’s long-term absence. The Exclusion Act has influenced generations of Chinese Americans.

Brave Orchid's brother-in-law, Moon Orchid's husband comes to America and for the same reason he can't go back to China; he lives with another Chinese-American woman and has a child with her. Brave Orchid herself does not meet her sister Moon Orchid until she is sixty-eight years old, more than thirty years since Brave Orchid left China, and Maxine's father is "the only brother [to No-name Woman who] never went back to China" (17). Maxine's parents have not been able to visit China since they immigrated to America, although they do want to. They still care about the news about China, waiting anxiously for letters from China and worrying about their relatives living in China. Similarly, in Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, we can infer that Jade Snow's father has a wife back in China. He marries Jade Snow's mother in America because he can't go back to China and his family can't come to America due to the Act. He arrives in America with the dream of making "a few thousand dollars" and then goes back to China to reunite with his family. He marries again and has his own American family, but he still keeps correspondence with his family in China. In one of his letters, he tells his Chinese wife "Do not bind our daughters' feet" (72). These details in *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *The Woman Warrior* cannot be rightly comprehended by people with no knowledge of the Act of Exclusion, which is essential for understanding Asian-American history as well as reading the two books.

Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* came out in 1950, about 25 years before the publication of *Aiiieeeee!*, which signifies the first appearance of literature actually identified as "Asian American." It was an era when Asian Americans were still called "oriental," an era lacking of awakening ethnic awareness. That is why, as Kim, in her study of the sociohistorical context of Asian-American literature, points out that, for

generations Asians have often been caricatured in American popular culture as “[t]he power-hungry despot, the helpless heathen, the sensuous dragon lady, the comical loyal servant, and the pudgy, desexed detective who talks about Confucius” (3). The most influential of the stereotyped Asian characters in American pop culture is Charlie Chan. Chan is an intelligent Honolulu-based detective; there are many stories about how he investigate mysteries and solves crimes while he is traveling around the world. Despite some of his good qualities such as being intelligent, heroic, benevolent and honorable, he cannot avoid being stereotyped by Americans as a typical one of East Asians. He is often portrayed as a person who speaks awkward English and behaves in an old-fashioned and subservient manner. Charlie Chan makes his first appearance in 1930s. We can still see some movies, radio programs, television shows and comics made from his stories even in the 1990s, attesting to his profound influence in American society.

The famous historian Hubert Howe Bancroft analyzes why the images of Chinese people in American media appeals to the audience’s interest:

It was quite amusing to see them here and there and everywhere and show them to strangers as one of the many unique features of which California could boast. It put one in quite good humor with one’s self to watch them waddling under the springy poles sustaining at either end a huge and heavily laden basket; it made one feel quite one’s superiority to see these queer little specimens of petrified progress, to listen to their high-keyed strains of feline conversation, and notice all their cunning curiosity and barbaric artlessness. (Kim 14).

The stereotyping of Asian Americans also happens in Anglo-American literary works by famous writers such as Bret Harte, Jack London, John Steinbeck, and Frank Norris...etc. Kim summarizes two basic kinds of stereotypes of Asians in Anglo-American literature: the “bad” Asians and the “good” Asians. The “bad” Asians are “the sinister villains and brute hordes, neither of which can be controlled by the Anglos and both of which must therefore be destroyed”; the “good” Asians are “the helpless heathens to be saved by Anglo heroes or the loyal and lovable allies, sidekicks, and servants” (4). A commonality Kim perceives in these portrayals is “the establishment of and emphasis on permanent and irreconcilable differences between the Chinese and the Anglo, differences that define the Anglo as superior physically, spiritually, and morally”(9). However, books that treat Asians as their subject matter are usually degraded as “much lesser stuff” and are generally not appreciated (3). Contemporary readers may be oblivious to most of these works, yet, undeniably, they have greatly contributed to national attitudes toward Asians.

Kim continues to point out that the influence of Orientalism as a prevailing ideology in the Symbolic order still lingers and American society still holds “clumsy racial fantasies about Asians continue to flourish in the West, and these extend to Asian Americans as well” (89). Asian Americans are sometimes still referred to as Americans of “Oriental” descendants. The word “Oriental” is an offensive term, indicating the Westerners’ hegemonic attitude toward eastern peoples and cultures, for which the famous cultural studies scholar Edward Said has invented the term “Orientalism.” Said explains:

Orientalism is the generic term that I have been employing to describe the Western approach to the Orient; Orientalism is the discipline by which the Orient was (and is) approached systematically, as a topic of learning, discovery and practice. But in addition I have been using the word to designate the collection of dreams, images and vocabularies available to anyone who has tried to talk about what lies East of the dividing line. These two aspect of Orientalism are not incongruent, since by use of them both Europe could advance securely and unmetaphorically upon the Orient. (*Orientalism* 73).

Said further claims that “the imaginative examination of things Oriental was based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an Oriental world emerged, first according to general ideas about who or what was an Oriental, then according to a detailed logic governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projection” (*Orientalism* 16). Said’s theory of Orientalism lends us a perspective to explore the psychological underpinning of the ethnocentric treatment of ethnic cultures, and further helps us map a social environment for the development of Asian American literary history: how Asian American writers have tried in more than one hundred years to figure out their writing situation; how they have chosen to write in response to orientalism, and have endeavored to find the direction of Asian American literature.

Orientalism, as a dominant perspective on Eastern cultures, perceives Asians as the Other in many literary and cultural works. It has exerted such a palpable influence

upon ethnic writers who aspire to publish in the mainstream establishment. For example, some critics, after analyzing *The Woman Warrior*, identify the influence of Orientalism upon Kingston. Sheng-mei Ma criticizes Kingston by noting that Orientalism is obvious in the book because China is depicted in an “orientalist” fashion. According to Ma, Kingston, a writer who has never been to China, appears to maintain a cold, distant relationship to China. Consequently, what she represents are orientalist and sexist stereotypes of China. Ma’s rationale for her criticism is that the Western “discursive tradition dealing with the subject and the subjugation of the East” is so deeply rooted that “some ‘Orientals’ living in the West are interpellated by and internalize Orientalism” (xiii). Therefore even Asian American writers have displayed a tendency to stereotype Asian Americans as different and inferior. Ma continues to explain that the American-born children have been unable to see their ethnic heritage outside of Western concepts of the Other, they are just a group of writers writing about China under “white gaze” (25). Another critic Sheryl A. Mylan concurs on Ma’s point concerning the influence of orientalism on Kingston’s ideology. In the essay “The Mother as Other: Orientalism in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*,” Mylan analyzes the relationship between Said’s concept of Orientalism and the representation of Chinese women in the text. She argues that Said’s notion that Orientalism is basically an ideology about Otherness deeply ingrained in Western cultural discourses. She concludes that the Orientalist manner exhibited in Kingston’s text and her detached attitude toward her mother and Chinese culture might be accounted for by the dominant ideologies of American society that Kingston inadvertently internalizes.



According to Kim's sociohistorical study, in the early years, Asian American writers do not have a clear understanding of the status American society has accorded them. They generally hold a naive attitude toward their writing career in the new land. They have seen themselves as "ambassadors of goodwill to the West" and often try to find "points of compatibility" between the people of the two cultures (Kim 24). In order to achieve this goal, most of their interpretations of Asia to the West are usually focused on high culture. Their writing is marked by their dissociation from the Asian common people. They consider themselves as a group of educated elites, different from the poor and uneducated members of their own race discriminated against by the white society and should be treated as such. According to Kim, in order to dispel the common misconceptions in the West about Asia and Asians and present an attractive picture of Asian life and culture, these writers deliberately attempt to win friends in the West for Asia through the dissemination of information about Asian traditional high cultures in their works. For example, in *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, Wong depicts an interesting and bizarre character called Uncle Kwok. Uncle Kwok, who works for Wong family's small sewing factory, was presented as an intellectual who cannot be understood by ordinary Chinese immigrants. He is quiet, consciously separating himself from people around him. He is very fastidious about cleanness, every day when he starts to work he will put on a "special apron, homemade from double thickness of heavy burlap and fastened at waist by strong denim ties" in order to "protect him from dirt and draft"(45). Wong calls him a "habitual handwasher." He has formed the habit of washing his hands frequently when he worked at a match factory in order to prevent sulfur on match tips from damaging his teeth. Now he still "washed and rewashed his nails almost every hour" (46). He thinks of

himself as a scholar, always carrying a black satchel full of Confucian classics, dreaming of one day he will become a private tutor.

Another example is Wong's father. Wong's father is an atypical owner of a family factory, the character portrayed as having a "habit for knowledge and self-improvement" (72). He converts to Christianity, learns English at a night school, and is educated "in a new doctrine of individual dignity and eternal personal salvation which revolutionized his traditional Chinese thinking" (72). His diligence is rewarding and he "[is] ordained a minister" eventually (72). Wong's characterization of this father figure is far beyond our understanding of the life of an immigrant. It looks as if his religious pursuit is more important than mundane survival. It is also hard to imagine that religious conversion is such an easy matter for a Chinese patriarch. He seems to accept American values without any difficulty and in some way he has fulfilled his American dream. Wong narrates the whole process lightly without dramatizing the conflicts between the promised land and the harsh reality. Little is known about what her father has psychologically been through. The treatment of psychological loss brought about by immigrants' uprootedness and displacement is scarcely seen in *Fifth Chinese Daughter*. Wong's family leads a somewhat decent life: they attend church services regularly, which is in sharp contrast to our impression of the daily life of the first-generation immigrants who usually live a rough life by running such a small sewing factory. Wong doesn't even mention her family members' struggle with English when she deals with their assimilation into their American life. A number of subtle and complex details that need to be prudently addressed have been simplified and even omitted by Wong. The pervasiveness of

optimism throughout the book is even hard to find decades later in Asian American literary texts themed immigration.

We can interpret Wong's and Kingston's texts from the perspective of the relationship between self and the Other; however, in both books, Asian American characters' sense of being the Other in American society is not well cultivated. Jade Snow's and Maxine's struggle with Chinese cultural traditions in their early years may be understood as their desire to leave for a larger society where they are free of patriarchal constraints and women can find their places. Moreover, the silence described in detail in *The Woman Warrior* is often seen by whites as unfavorable aspects of Asian-American characters; no matter it is because of their language skills or their passive and submissive personalities, they are all unassimilable aliens. Jade Snow's life trajectory is just another typical assimilative story falling into the stereotype of a model minority member. Kingston has accepted much harsher critical condemnation for her innovative style, and on the other hand has held longer and more intense attention as well. Critics find too many distortions in her substantial rewriting of Chinese folklores and her mother's talk-stories. Kingston's rewriting violates the unspoken principle of representation of ethnic cultures by ethnic writers: authenticity. Whether *The Woman Warrior* is an authentic representation of Chinese culture is the starting point of most criticism. There exists an assumption in the blasting of Kingston: the violation of authenticity is equivalent to the conformity to Orientalist stereotyping because inauthenticity in ethnic texts may cause white readers' misreading. Chin, as Kingston's most relentless critic who accuses her book of being "unChinese" and "a fake," actually criticizes Kingston by relating inauthenticity to an Orientalist perspective (Madison 268). In his opinion, Kingston is

presenting to her readers more Orientalist stereotypes. Chin also asserts that Kingston is “practising an inauthentic Orientalism inherited from the apologetic autobiographies written in the Chinese American ‘high’ tradition” (Madison 257).

The strong reactions of Kingston’s contemporaries to Orientalism demonstrate their consciousness of its influence on the national ideology as well as Asian Americans’ identity as the Other in American society. That’s why they insist that Asian American writers should write politically in response to the American dominant ideology. According to some critics, being the Other of their own community, as well as in the mainstream society, Kingston and other Asian American women writers should have had explicit political positions by facing up to the rampant discrimination of the two Symbolic orders they live in. For example, Sau-ling Wong points out that the “Orientalist effect” of *The Woman Warrior* is caused by its readers’ misunderstanding of Chinese culture and Chinese Americans, which is owed to Kingston’s failure to critique patriarchal values or institutionalized racism. The heated debate over *The Woman Warrior* has actually led the development of Asian American literature toward such a direction: one that investigates the power between the dominant culture and the ethnic community. Therefore, just as the critic David Li suggests, the value of *The Woman Warrior* lies precisely in foregrounding the “representational issues that have accompanied the growth of Asian American creative and critical production” (*Imagining* 62).

Besides Orientalism, another ideology of the Symbolic order that has informed ethnic writers is the myth of the American Dream, which has been an abiding subject in the history of American literature. Like Orientalism, the theme of the American dream

involves the sensitive issue of ethnic writers' identities and their political position on the treatment of American dominant social values. As a result, the American success myth has become a target for the ethnic nationalist critics in the debate.

Earlier Asian American literature has had a tendency to simplify the assimilation of ethnic groups, especially in the decades when the American literary canon was far less open and receptive to the voice of ethnic writers. It has become a generic model that an ethnic narrative features an ethnic hero who overcomes all the obstacles along the way and ends up successfully assimilating into the dominant culture. In contrast, those who are unable to integrate themselves are normally marginalized as minor characters by this standardization. The basic premise of this assimilation model, according to the literary scholar William Boelhower, is that an ethnic protagonist "representing an ethnic world-view...through a series of trials is led to reconsider them in terms of his final status" (5). This assimilation model is very common in narratives by Anglo-American writers. Boelhower's words shows Anglo-American writers' biased perception of ethnic minorities, especially the first generation immigrants, "what is essential...they are *foreigners* (aliens) and immigrants (uprooted): they are *na ÷ve, ignorant* of American life in all its facets, have a *language* barrier, are *unassimilated* and crucially, *hopeful* initiates" (6).

Boelhower's premise is rooted in the success myth inherent in American society. As Richard Weiss reveals in his book *The American Myth of Success: From Horatio Alger to Normal Vincent Peale*, the success myth is built upon the belief that "all men, in accordance with certain rules but exclusively by their own efforts, can make of their lives

what they will” (3). It is the so-called American dream that almost every immigrant comes to the United States with.

Weiss points out that success in this framework is defined in terms of “early American Puritanism” associated with a set of Puritan values such as “industry, frugality, and prudence”; in other words, “[men] living by these rules were likely to be successful; men living in violation of them were certain to fail” (4-5). This conviction to a great extent retains the fundamentally held American ideological underpinnings of success and has profoundly influenced intellectual currents in late 19th and 20th century. The women’s studies scholar Margo Culley traces the development of a tradition of women’s life-writing within historically and socially specific contexts. She sees that Puritanism has been at work in regard to fashioning the genre tradition from its early time until today. Although many of ethnic texts draw attention to the harshness of displacement, alienation and identity loss of ethnic group members, the real attraction to their readers, however, is the American success myth. It can be said that the American Dream is the core of American mainstream values, by which Wong and Kingston to varying degree are informed. Wong and Kingston have different versions of American Dream. Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter* is a more typical story of the fulfillment of American dream, the author herself is a practitioner of its tenets, and the story ends with her becoming a professional woman and establishing her own business.

Despite the fact that the hatred of the dominant society for Asian Americans revealed by the Act of Exclusion negates the doctrine of equality inherent in the American Dream, it has not prevented them from operating historically in American literature and has become the dominant literary theme for many years. It is not until after

the Civil Rights Movement, with more and more debunking of the myth of the American dream, the interrogation of this myth begins to grow increasingly stronger.

The myth of the American dream is awkwardly translated by Wong into her *Fifth Chinese Daughter*. In the last chapter, the operation of this ideological apparatus has been exposed. Jade Snow's father's remark best summarizes the equality the American Dream advocates. In his letter to his cousin back in China, he writes, "You don't realize the shameful and degraded position into which the Chinese culture has pushed its women. Here in America, the Christian concept allows women their freedom and individuality. I wish my daughters to have this Christian opportunity. I am hoping that some day I may be able to claim that by my stand I have washed away the former disgraces suffered by the women of our family" (246). It is ironic, however, that a patriarch in Wong's time has been transformed into a person who believes in the equality between men and women; he says so as if it is a long-cherished wish of him. He used to be a person who has treated his son and daughter differently. We still remember that in the first chapter his privileging of the son once hurts Jade Snow terribly.

The American myth, according to the literary scholar Werner Sollars, depends on the myth of monolingualism. That is to say, the success story in ethnic literature has become a cliché which entails the assumption that America is a monolingual country. Just as Sollars observes, the "ideal of monolingualism" based on "false myths of a monolingual past" has captivated the American imagination (203). However, this success myth is problematic. It rests upon the assumption that opportunities are open to every individual regardless of their race and ethnicity. This assumption is obviously an oversimplification of the social complexity that factors like race, ethnicity, class,

language, culture etc. might significantly pose limitations on ethnic people's aspirations to integrate. The decontextualization of these success stories tends to provide two extreme versions of plot, either ultimate assimilation or failure to assimilate, ascribes ethnic people's failure to adapt to their lack of hard work and very often categorizes them into winners or losers.

The two extreme versions of plot mentioned above are often seen in narratives by early ethnic immigrants. In these narratives we don't see straightforward skepticism about the myth of the American dream. Readers may wonder: what are the author's real reactions to this ideology of the Symbolic? Bakhtin's concept of dialogism provides us with an approach for understanding the intersubjective communication between the author and his or her imagined audience. According to Bakhtin's dialogism, every literary work should be seen as being in a dialogue with other works and authors, and the writer is writing as a dialogic self who "is oriented precisely toward such an actively responsive understanding. He does not expect passive understanding that...only duplicates his own idea in someone else's mind. Rather, he expects response, agreement, sympathy, objection, execution, and so forth" (69). This point of view demands that the reader, when reading ethnic autobiography, should not only see what happened, but also see the dialogic nature of the text and the act of writing.

Similarly, the writer's writing process involves an "actively responsive understanding" of the Other (69). As a dialogic self, he is supposed to decode the Other's meaning, actively figure out the Other's intention, and then prepares his own response to the Other. The critic Wendy Ho points out that *The Woman Warrior*, as a mix of genres and discourses, "executes disarrangements and defamiliarization," which conveys that



“writing is not transparent but something to be decoded and reconstructed through the reader’s or listener’s collaborative efforts.” (236). Further, autobiography as a Western genre has served to “power and define centers, margins, boundaries, and grounds of action in the West” and has often represented a woman as the Other who is characterized as an “encumbered self, identified almost entirely by the social roles concomitant with her biological destiny” (Smith 12-3). If a woman is represented as the Other, a woman of color may be represented the doubled Other in the autobiography as a Western genre.

As Chinese-American women writers writing in English, Wong and Kingston are writing as the doubled Other in dialogue with their readers and the tradition of a genre that does not belong to their own culture. What they have only available to them is the language of the Anglocentric Symbolic, out of which they will have to create their only style. It is due to the very lack of their own language that many early Chinese-American writers tend to align their works with cultural expectations of “model minority” from the Symbolic by representing immigrants’ lives in a positive way. As a matter of fact, this preoccupation with “positive” racial representation also exists in the history of black literature. Du Bois, in his essay “Negro Art” published in 1921, describes white people’s prejudice toward racial minorities and the desire of blacks for idealized literary representations: “We want everything said about us to tell of the best and highest and noblest in us...we fear that the evil in us will be called racial, while in others, it is viewed as individual” (55). Although some Asian Americans feel the need to challenge the negative view of Asians in the West, it is too simplistic of these Asian Americans to hold curiosity about white readers and present a superficial and idealized version of their lives.

The lack of interrogation of white society's hegemonic attitude signals a submissive manner to its stereotyping of Asian Americans as "model minority" and this view becomes very fashionable in 1940s. The term "model minority" indicates that it is a group of ethnic people who are not trouble-makers—they never challenge the white society, or protest against inequality or take themselves "too seriously" (88). They obediently accept their inferior status and work hard to assimilate into American life. This mindset is called by Kim "a collective colonized spirit" (88). Kim argues that writing with such a mindset makes it possible to "relinquish our marginality, and to lose ourselves in an intense identification with the hegemonic culture" (88). Until Kingston publishes *The Woman Warrior* and attracts tremendous critical attention in 1970s, the stereotyping of Asian Americans has been the historical conditions for the acceptance of their literary works. Publishing has been so difficult for Asian American writers because:

publishers had deliberately rejected Asian American writing that contradicted popular racist views: Americans' stereotypes of "Orientals" were sacrosanct and no one, especially a "Chink" or a "Jap," was going to tell them that America, not Asia, was their home, that English was their language, and that the stereotype of the Oriental good or bad, was offensive. What America published was, with rare exception, not only offensive to Chinese and Japanese America but was *actively inoffensive* to white sensibilities (Kim 174).

When Wong chooses to adopt autobiography to write about herself, she has anticipated the possible reactions from the white readers and Asian American readers. In 1950s, when Chinese Americans are still called "Oriental" descendants, it is not easy. Her

choice of the third person narration can be her reconciliation with Chinese culture. Wong had to write her own story in the third person with the consideration of its reception in the Chinese community; as she says, “Even written in English, an ‘I’ book by Chinese would seem outrageously immodest to anyone raised in the spirit of Chinese propriety” (qtd Culley vii). Because Chinese culture does not encourage individuality, in Old China, women even called themselves “slaves.” Growing up in such a patriarchal society, Wong knows very well what trouble using the first person will cause her. Wong explains in the preface of *Fifth Chinese Daughter* that she uses the third person for the “submergence of the individual” (xiii). Wong’s rhetorical concern is not known to many white readers who may be confused by why she flouts the generic tradition of writing in the first person. For example, Shirley Lim and Leslie Bow argue, “Wong’s choice of voice” has a distancing effect (88). According to them, Wong is baffled by the way her parents educate her; she does not know how to explain to her readers so that they will not misunderstand her, what she can do is only to let herself to be “presented at a distance, as an object” because she knows that the first person “permits no distance between herself and her cultural materials” (Lim and Bow 257). However, this kind of distancing weakens Wong’s own subject position and the narrator’s identity as the authorial surrogate by writing about her self from a somewhat distant perspective. In this way Wong may want to dissociate herself from the daughter in the story because an unfilial daughter in Chinese culture is a “bad” daughter, which makes her very uncomfortable. Wong’s discomfort is seen by Lim and Bow as her motive for choosing the third person, which indicates that, even though Wong disapproves of the ideologies of the patriarchal Symbolic, she dare not openly rebel against it.

Writing in the third person, Wong is in some way exempt from being responsible for what the narrator has said or done. Literary critic Patricia Lin Blinde blames Wong for this “view of life as self-determined totalities” (66). And yet literary critic Kathleen Loh Swee Yin and Kristoffer F. Paulson don’t agree with Blinde; they think that Blinde’s misunderstanding of the form of *Fifth Chinese Daughter* doesn’t take into full account the constraints Wong’s culture imposes on her and therefore is “a judgment based seemingly on her feminist values of the 1970s” (Yin and Paulson 53).

In *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine mentions that she has a list to tell Brave Orchid. There are “[o]ver two hundred things that [she] had to tell [her] mother” (197). Actually each chapter in this book can be viewed as an item in her list constituting her multifarious problems in her life. Each item is indicative of one of her desires as well, and hence makes a part of her subjectivity. In fact, each chapter of this book features a Chinese woman through whose story the narrator strives to understand what is Chinese and what is American, and what she will grow up to be. Therefore Lim concludes that this book is constructed on “fragments, of stories, ideas, thoughts, images, asides, which *circle around* and *accumulate* to form the expression of the idea of Chinese American female subjectivity” (263). The relevance of these women’s stories to Kingston enables her to project her subjectivity onto them, and forge a connection between Asian American women and Chinese women.

Kingston abandons the conventional chronological form of autobiography instead of adopting the form of “Zhanghui” novel (episodic novel) of Chinese literature in her book. It is made up of six chapters consisting of a series of stories by and about the narrator. This book might easily be classified as a collection of independent stories pulled

in different directions. Yet all the chapters are just like the reflections of the multi-facets of American society and the author's psyche. Perhaps the nonchronological order and lack of coherence may not suit our habit of reading an autobiography, but it suits our way of thinking. Just as Blinde points out, Kingston is "report[ing] 'reality' at its most real- namely the unconstructed flow of events, thoughts, places, and people without the constraints of time, place, or other predetermined concepts" (61). Kingston, on the other hand, also explains in *The Woman Warrior* that she chooses to write in this form because she wants to truthfully represent herself. Maxine makes the list because she wants her mother to know it "so that she would know the true things about me and to stop the pain in my throat" (197). The whole book can be seen as a list which allows the author to present multiple subjectivities and discourses (race, culture, political, gender). From this perspective it is coherent rather than fragmentary.

From Bakhtin's point of view, Kingston's style is more dynamic and interactive because it needs to be "decoded and reconstructed through the reader's or listener's collaborative efforts," which cannot be achieved by a linear order (Ho 236). Kingston later explains in an interview why she writes in a nonchronological order: she thinks that as a writer, "any one of us is free to be looked at from the point of view of any other human being on this earth" (Whalen-Bridge 70). She also points out that the form she chooses enables her to achieve the artistic freedom she has desired: "...what we can do is fly out of our own body and inhabit the body of somebody of our own race and class and gender" (70).

Due to their status as the doubled Other, Smith contends that autobiography should be a tool for ethnic female writers to "talk back" to the dominant discourse (20).

Bakhtin's view on language offers a guideline in this regard. According to Bakhtin's dialogism, language is "the site of contradictions and struggle" (120), which means "every concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear" (271). In addition, Bakhtin's another concept, heteroglossia, emphasizes the heterogeneity of a linguistic community, multiple voices in a community that often exist in tension with each other. As the dominant always tries to suppress different voices, multiple voices in turn will challenge the dominant. Therefore, the female writers' stories and voices are their resistance against the patriarchal master narrative that tries to devalue and dominate them.

Autobiography is not only concerned about the history of an individual, but inextricably bound up with the history of the families, communities, and the nation. For these authors, the very act of autobiographical writing is closely linked with the history of American literature as well. As Holte notes, "the American question is a question of self, and the autobiography is a central part of American literary tradition" (Culley 253-54). However, Kim points out at the same time, in America, autobiography is an "anglocentric" as well as an "androcentric" genre, because it spreads puritan values, and American men publish significantly more autobiographies than American women (6). Nevertheless, this disparity does not apply when it comes to ethnic women writers. Ethnic women writers seem to be more popular than ethnic male writers in American society. Kingston and *The Woman Warrior* have been more famous than any other male writers and any of their works. This may account for Chin's aversion to Kingston and other Chinese American women writers, where he thinks that they have reinforced "the

stereotypically unmanly nature of Chinese Americans” (Aiiieeee! xxxi). In Chin’s opinion,

Language is the medium of culture and the people’s sensibility, including the style of manhood...On the simplest level, a man in any culture speaks for himself. Without a language of his own, he is no longer a man. The concept of the dual personality deprives the Chinese-American and the Japanese-American of the means to develop their own terms. (Qtd. Culley 253).

In *The Woman Warrior*, Brave Orchid often uses talk-stories to educate Maxine. Maxine is so engaged in her mother’s stories that sometimes she dreamed about them, “Night after night my mother would talk-story...I couldn’t tell where the stories left off and the dreams began” (19). It is therefore almost impossible to separate Kingston’s American life from her mother’s Chinese talk-stories which is a visible influence in Kingston’s writing: the boundaries between the reality, the stories, and the dreams have become blurring, what really happened and what is imagined are difficult to tell from each other, which is the source of the debate over its genre: whether it is fiction or autobiography. The book contains elements of both genres: family past, personal experience, Chinese history, and yet it adopts forms of Chinese myths, folklores and talk-stories, looking like a mix of a lot of things. Despite the negative reviews it received in early years, this kind of form has garnered more and more justifications and favorable critical receptions in recent decades. In the opinion of the critic Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, Kingston has managed to create “a surreal sense of identity” by juxtaposing the real with the imaginary (68). Blinde regards Kingston’s form as “a collage of genres,” symbolic of

her confusion deriving from her experience of growing up ethnic. Blinde continues to point out, to understand the form of this book, it takes “esthetic considerations beyond those accorded the static solidity of literatures that easily designated ‘novels,’ ‘autobiography,’ or ‘poems’” because one genre does not suffice to portray Kingston’s American circumstances she desires to represent (52-3). Blinde continues to explain, “[i]t is as if the richness of a bicultural life experience cannot be contained within the limits of literary dictates and that a ‘spill-over’ from one form to another is the only justice that can be done in the rendition of such a life” (53). In her later criticism, Lim observes that it is not a personal story that Kingston intends to tell, but “a racial and gendered consciousness” that she wants to reify in her book (Culley 264).

The limits of literary realism have driven Kingston to move into the realm of imagination. A sociohistorical interpretation does not help us to entirely comprehend Maxine’s private world. In the first chapter “No Name Woman,” Kingston does not provide a historical and cultural context for her aunt’s story. She learns about her aunt from her mother, and recounts it to us. Nevertheless, *Brave Orchid* in her storytelling hides too many things that are unspeakable in Chinese traditional culture; Kingston has to use her own imagination and has created a version which is partly truth and partly fiction. For example, she imagines that her aunt cannot afford an extramarital affair because it not only goes against the traditional values, but also, for a country woman, “[a]dultery is extravagance...[she] could not have been the lone romantic who gave up everything for sex” (6). So Kingston conjectures that her aunt could have been raped, “Some man had commanded her to lie with him and be his secret evil” (6). Since nobody in the family wants to talk about her aunt, not even wants to mention her name, *Brave Orchid* hasn’t



said anything about adultery either; she only mentions that she has an illegitimate child and the disgrace causes her to drown herself in a well. Kingston has made up the details based on Brave Orchid's fragmented narration and her own knowledge of Chinese patriarchal society:

Perhaps she had encountered him in the fields or on the mountain where the daughters-in-law collected fuel. Or perhaps he first noticed her in the marketplace. He was not a stranger because the village housed no strangers. She had to have dealings with him other than sex. Perhaps he worked an adjoining field, or he sold her the cloth for the dress she sewed and wore. His demand must have surprised, then terrified her. She obeyed him; she always did as she was told (6).

Kingston has fabricated a few versions of her aunt's adultery; one possible version is, "It could very well have been, however, that my aunt did not take subtle enjoyment of her friend, but, a wild woman, kept rollicking company" (8). But then she dismisses it as impossible, "[i]magine her free with sex doesn't fit, though. I don't know any women like that, or men either" (8). Kingston acknowledges that she writes the story in the way as it is because she has been trying to find something useful from her Chinese aunt to help with her current depressing life situation in America. Lacking of personal experience, Kingston can only base her imagination on her community life, her family life, and her mother's talk-stories, and yet she fails to see the relation of her aunt's story to her own reality as she initially wished, "Unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help" (8).

People habitually expect to see in autobiography photographic truth and do not accept fiction because the genre is thought to be about what is real. In this sense Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* looks more like a conventional autobiography and hence is more acceptable than *The Woman Warrior*. However, Wong, like Kingston, also has very limited accessibility to real Chinese culture. This is quite common for America-born ethnic writers who grow up between two cultures, as Kingston describes in her book, "Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, you mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?" (5-6). Kingston even questions how traditional Chinese culture is transmitted back in China since there are so many cultural taboos Chinese people don't like to talk about. "I don't see how they keep up a continuous culture for five thousand years. Maybe they didn't; maybe everyone makes it up as they go along" (185). Abandoning traditional realism, Kingston tries to find a new form to explore what is belying the overt silence. She resorts to oral tradition and imagination, which are the two major means through which the culture is transmitted and ethnic children understand their own cultural heritage.

Perhaps readers should come to treat *The Woman Warrior* as a new form of autobiography considering that it is Kingston's way of accessing the truth. Furthermore, a writer has two worlds, one is real, one is imagined, no matter which, they are both her worlds. What is the importance of distinguishing what is real, what is imagined? When Kingston writes "I couldn't tell where the stories left off and the dreams began," what's

the point of the readers telling the difference between the two (19)? Is labeling it as to genre more important than the fine qualities inherent in it?

Another controversial issue resulting from the discussion of the genre of *The Woman Warrior* is the authenticity of the representation of ethnic culture and life. Chin and his colleagues call the Chinese culture in *The Woman Warrior* inauthentic and hence “unChinese.” They associate this inauthenticity with the author’s integrity because inauthentic representation of Chinese culture will influence how white readers read ethnic texts, and they don’t want Chinese culture to be misread as a foreign culture. According to them, Kingston’s distortions of Chinese culture are tantamount to the stereotyping of Chinese Americans by white society. Kingston retorts by claiming her American identity, “When we say we are Chinese, it is short for Chinese-American or ethnic Chinese, because I am an American writer, who, like other American writers, wants to write the great American novel” (Whalen-Bridge 58-59).

For an autobiography, more important than the concern about what happened is how the author narrates the story to her readers because facts in real life will be accepted by readers only after they are processed by the writer. A talented writer is able to skillfully direct our attention to the larger issues behind the facts. In some chapters, Kingston’s choices of other people’s stories in some way disentangles her from her relationship with white audience since her identity switches from the Other to an irrelevant outsider, and her distortions of these stories through an Asian-American perspective makes possible her dialogic communication with her American readers. White people, who often turn a blind eye to the stereotyping and discrimination of racial minorities, may be brought closer to and even identify with them through the writer’s

narration, and then make an analogy in their daily life, which is more rhetorically effective and affective than direct confrontation.

A lot of critics have insisted on the so-called factuality as a criterion to evaluate nonfictional works including autobiography. But the truth is, as a genre of self-representation, autobiography is an authorial construct that is itself a fiction. Due to the temporal distance between the protagonist and the author, autobiographical writing is in fact based on the author's elusive memories instead of absolute truths. However, autobiographers often feel compelled to stick to "facts" in order for their works to look as factual as possible, which has turned out to be rather awkward and superficial. As Lim describes, "the biographer, by implication, is not free but inhibited by the demands of accuracy and attention to detail which, paradoxically, militate against the achievement of a higher form of truth" (57). The famous biographer John Garraty also sees having or having not the freedom to imagine in their writing as a big difference between a novelist and a biographer, "the secret of the novelist's success lies in his unrestricted imagination" whereas "the biographer is bound by what he has...the sources must be there, and all the relevant sources must be considered" (24).

The notion that autobiography should achieve an absolute truth is, in the words of the literary critic Robert Scholes, "textual fundamentalism" (52). According to Scholes, truth is relative, and sometimes is ambiguous, and therefore should be contextualized. Kingston similarly responds to the accusations concerning the genre of *The Woman Warrior* in an interview. She says, although she has created a fictional cosmos in the book, she is honest with her readers about that, "I always tell you I made this part up and that part up, where they make a complete story without a interfering kind of outlook" ("A

Conversation” 6). Kingston also expresses her opinion about how to look at truth in fiction and nonfiction:

I think fiction can be “truer” than nonfiction. Let’s say you wanted to write about a friend in a fiction. When something that a person does in real life has a very strong impact, you can come up with an equivalent action just as powerful. That way you don’t hurt the friend who won’t be able to recognize it because it’s not his own action. Also the action you make up is stronger than the one that actually occurred, and it can be more to the point” (7).

Autobiographical writing, as Lim observes, is the writer’s imaginings of self. For ethnic female autobiographers, if they possess “awareness of function of the text,” writing will offer an opportunity for them to “liberate themselves from commonplace notions of the exotic,” to divorce themselves from “social documentation” in order to channel their energies to “the power of the literary artifact” (58).

In an interview when asked about her political consciousness and her writing, Kingston states:

I used to want to get away from any political discussion because I thought it was important that the writer writes anything and there shouldn’t be any usefulness to what we write. We do it for the fun of it and for art’s sake, and should not think about constraints. But now I’m beginning to see that it may be the obligation of artists to have a vision of a future. We need an idea before we can create who we are and what our society is. (Skenazy and Martin 110).

It can be said that politics is an unavoidable issue for ethnic writers, especially ethnic female writers. It is in some way reasonable for Chin to censure Kingston and some other Chinese-American women writers for lacking of political consciousness. When you publish in the mainstream society, you can't only see your gender identity and ignore your ethnic identity, because you are publishing as a Chinese American female writer. Although during the period right after their mirror stage—the crucial awakening period in their psychological growth, sexism is more oppressive than racism, race is a more important determinant of their establishment in the mainstream society because “for women to have a gender identity is itself a ‘race’ privilege” (Spelman 55). The difference between white women and ethnic women should not be measured only by culture. While gender becomes the primary concern for white women because they need not think of themselves in racial terms, for ethnic women, the foundational category is race, which is indicative of that “subjectivities may not be created equal,” and it takes ethnic writers more effort to establish their subjectivities (Spelman55). Clearly the “minority model” and “success stories” in early ethnic literature understates the role of race as a foundational category as well as simplifies the complex realities, and therefore undermines the credibility of the characters’ subjectivities. Therefore, the conflicted, ambivalent, long suppressed, rebellious Maxine in *The Woman Warrior* has a much more multifaceted subjectivity than the filial, hardworking, persistent, optimistic Jade Snow in *Fifth Chinese Daughter*. Finding a niche in reality necessitates the consciousness of the complexities of their lives which is the basic politic consciousness of ethnic female writers. As a matter of fact, Kingston went to Berkeley in 1960s, a time when the civil rights movement was in full swing. She talks in an interview about how she was

awakened by this movement led by black people, and points out that people of other racial minorities must ask themselves, “Where am I in this?” and then “make your place in it” (Whalen-Bridge 80).

Unlike Wong, Kingston’s political consciousness is manifest in her rewriting of stories from Chinese culture and her family. Kingston plays the role of both insider and outsider in her interpretation of Chinese culture. On the one hand, she must appear very knowledgeable, knowing everything about the social and cultural context in which her stories happen so that she can be a reliable narrator, telling her stories to the uninformed American reader. Interestingly, on the other hand, she is an American girl who has never been to China, in other words, she is an outsider who does not fully understand Chinese culture references and Chinese people. She understands, imagines and reinvents these stories with a feminist subjectivity as displayed in her interpretation of the stories of woman characters such as No Name Woman, Fa Mu Lan, Brave Orchid, Moon Orchid, and Ts’ai Yen. This kind of intertextuality that characterizes *The Woman Warrior*, according to Lim, is Kingston’s “deliberate stylistic inventiveness” (69). Kingston would have not written in this way if she hadn’t realized its empowering potential.

When *The Woman Warrior* was being published, Asian American literature was dominated by a bunch of male writers and critics led by Chin. They took it for granted that they could define Asian American literature and decide its direction. The acceptance of Kingston’s and other Chinese-American women writers by the white society obviously threatened the status of male writers in Asian American literary establishment, undermining their attempt to construct a monolingual male identity for Asian American literature. Kingston has of course realized the anti-female attitude from Chin; she

explains, “It’s sometimes from a masculine-feminine point of view. So many minority men are angry at minority women for saying anything, especially among Chinese Americans. For some reasons, most of our writers are women, and most of our critics are men. And the men are saying that we have feminized Chinese American history because our history is mostly masculine” (Skenazy and Martin 84). Kingston further points out where those male writers’ sense of superiority comes from, “There were mostly men who came here for one hundred years, and yet there are women who write. So these critics are saying, ‘how dare you write it?’” (84). Also Chin’s reproach that Kingston’s pandering to white audience, according to Kingston, is “his stereotyping of women being manipulated by white men” as he battles with white society while trying to unify and homogenize Asian American writers’ effort (Skenazy and Martin 84).

In the second chapter of *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston tells her two encounters as an employee with racist bosses. When she works at an art supply house, her boss asks her to “[o]rder more that nigger yellow,” Maxine only protests in her “bad, small-person’s voice that makes no impact” (48). Another incident happens when she worked at a land developers’ association. Her boss deliberately picks a restaurant picketed by CORE and the NAACP to hold a business banquet and asks Maxine to type the invitations. Maxine only whispers in an “unreliable” voice (49). Maxine’s reactions disappoint some feminist critics who expect to see Kingston’s scathing condemnation of racial discrimination by delineating a real woman warrior. They feel that the reading of feminism in this book has been exaggerated. In the same chapter, the story of Fa Mu Lan is unsatisfactory as well. Her heroism lies in that she disguises herself as a man and takes her father’s place to fight as a soldier against the emperor. After the war, Fa Mu Lan



takes off her armor and returns home to take on her domestic duties: taking care of her parents, husband and children as ordinary Chinese women are supposed to do. We see in Fa Mu Lan feudal ethnics such as filial piety and obedience to her husband, hence Cheung comments, “[this] self-empowering fantasy is also self-defeating, attesting to the tenacity of patriarchal norms” (87). In the opinion of the critic Yuan Shu, in spite of the feminist twist in Kingston’s rewriting of Fa Mu Lan’s story, she chooses to employ the vocabulary of the patriarchal discourse. Moreover, these critics argue that with all of the major characters—Maxine, Fa Mu Lan, and Brave Orchid—failing to challenge institutionalized discrimination, how could *The Woman Warrior* be called a feminist work? Maxine’s two incidents just have some “racial overtones and implications” (215); Brave only complains about her living condition, “I have worked too much. Human beings don’t work like this in China” (123). In fact, Maxine is mainly critical of her family life. She does not explore the institutionalized racism and sexism. She doesn’t even draw attention to the Civil Rights Movement, therefore, it is not a protest narrative.

Perhaps these critics choose to write about *The Woman Warrior* just in order to relate it to contemporary feminist critical theories. They don’t think about the fact that Maxine’s limitation should be owed to the limitation of her time. Maxine realizes the inequality between men and women, yet, her female subjectivity is still immature, which we can see in Maxine’s remark: “I went away to college—Berkeley in the sixties—and I studied, and I marched to change the world, but I did not turn into a boy. I would have liked to bring myself back as a boy for my parents to welcome with chickens and pigs” (47). When we talk about women’s resistance against inequality, their places in their societies should be something in question. In Mu Lan’s society, it is a man’s duty to

fight, women are not allowed to appear in the battlefield. Mu Lan is more powerful than other male soldiers and under her leadership, the army overthrows the corrupt emperor. Isn't Kingston's twist a subversion to the patriarchal definition of womanhood? In the original version of "The Ballad of Mu-Lan," Mu Lan fights for the emperor instead of against him. Isn't Kingston's twist a challenge to the patriarchal value of being loyal to the sovereign? It is also noteworthy that Kingston's selection of the legend of Fa Mu Lan is not accidental. She tells us in the book, "I would grow up a wife and a slave, but [my mother] taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan." Life seems to be more hopeful now that she has had two choices in her future. Although the two contrasting choices come from Chinese culture, she identifies herself with the Chinese heroic female figure, so she is determined, "I would have to grow up a warrior woman" (20).

Maxine has heard or seen different adapted versions of the swordswoman Mu Lan. They are all different from each other. She first learns about Mu Lan from her mother's talk-story. She dreams about Mu Lan, she also sees a movie about Fa Mu Lan. They are the three sources from which her own fantasy of the woman warrior derives from. Mu Lan's story is still told by the first person narrator Maxine as if she is imagining she is living the life of Mu Lan. Kingston's particularly interested in Mu Lan because she wants to set up a model to empower Maxine as a depressed and confused ethnic girl who struggles to find a place in a male-dominated community as well as a larger white-dominated society. She has to turn to this fantasy after she fails to confront adversity and challenges in her life. A Chinese character Mu Lan is, her courage and bravery also meet the standard of heroines in American culture. Kingston wants to find a concord between the two cultures and gain recognition from both sides. However, Mu

Lan's ultimate triumph turns out to make some Chinese male readers and some feminist readers more than a little uneasy.

Kingston doesn't think Maxine and Mu Lan are so different; she writes: "[the] swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar" (53). What connects them are "the words at [their] backs" (53). Mu Lan's parents carve words of revenge on her back reminding her what she was fighting for, while Kingston puts words on paper that is a personal narrative act. Mu Lan's silent obedience to her parents is the way she performs her filial obligations. But Kingston's writing is more like an enactment of female agency; she takes her revenge through her writing. She displays much greater self-consciousness about gender than Mu Lan. Her narration of her aunt's story shows her refusal to align herself with patriarchal feminine values and to join in the oppression of her aunt by her family, "The real punishment was not the raid swiftly inflicted by the villagers, but the family's deliberately forgetting her" (16). She realizes that enlivening the forgotten woman can substantially influence the gender and social actualities in society. Of course Kingston's self-consciousness in *The Woman Warrior* is a result from the collective political awakening of her era. We also have to remember that, since Wong's book was published in 1950, her situation is quite different; hence *Fifth Chinese Daughter* is just "a scrupulously genteel account of their family life" (Lim 257). Jade Snow is unhappy about her family life, but "her rebellion is more often repressed than expressed" (Lim257).

Kingston does give voice to Chinese people who are silenced in Orientalist stereotyping. In *The Woman Warrior*, Brave Orchid is portrayed as the most expressive, articulate storyteller. It is her talk-stories that have helped Kingston construct her autobiography. In this book, immigrants "shouted face to face and yelled room to room"

(11). Talking loudly is very common among immigrants, as Kingston writes, “The immigrants I know have loud voices, unmodulated to American tones even after years away from the village where they called their friendships out across the fields. I have not been able to stop my mother’s screams in public libraries or over telephones” (11). Immigrant children who are often quiet in American school are very noisy in their Chinese school. We also learn that even the silent girl who Maxine forces to talk in school, behaves differently at home when Maxine tells her, “I was walking past your house when you didn’t know I was there. I heard you yell in English and in Chinese. You weren’t just talking. You were shouting” (178). Therefore, Maxine’s conclusion that “Chinese communication was loud, public. Only sick people had to whisper” is different from the impression Chinese immigrants have left upon American public society. The message Kingston conveys is that being quiet and obedient is just one aspect of Chinese people’s character, which should not be used to stereotype them. Cheung puts forward similar opinion about the Western stereotyping of the silence of eastern people, “To counter Orientalism is to challenge Western reduction or homogenization of Asian traits, but not necessarily to deny or denounce the traits themselves” (128). Furthermore, in *The Woman Warrior*, young Maxine also observes that “speaking in an inaudible voice” actually is one characteristic of American femininity, which she was trying to imitate in her adolescence, where she “was having to turn [her]self American feminine, or no dates” (47).

Of course, the generic model of early immigrant literature can be seen in both *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *The Woman Warrior*. Jade Snow’s American dream at last comes true: she wins an essay contest, graduates from college and finds a decent job.

More importantly, she gains recognition from her parents, “But now, in her moment of triumph, she could find no sense of conquest or superiority...[S]he could feel no resentment against the two who had no words of congratulation-Daddy, who wanted so much to record a picture of her and her college president, nor Mama, working with tears of mingled joy and sadness in her eyes” (181). Wong’s conformity to the pattern of success stories makes the ending look rather artificial and unpersuasive since it contradicts the fact that Jade Snow’s family does not attach importance to girls’ education. Her father, the symbol of the patriarch in this book, thinks the duties of a girl are to get married and have children.

The ending has left some paradoxes and conflicts unresolved as well: Jade Snow’s ambivalence toward her two existential worlds appears in a few chapters but doesn’t sustain it; it simply vanishes near the end of the book. The final family celebration undervalues Jade Snow’s previous questioning of patriarchal values as well as her attempt to seek individuality and accentuates the importance of being recognized by the two Symbolic orders of her life. The critic Leslie Bow contends, “Jade Snow’s position in the world at the end of the narrative is neither secure nor settled” (Bow 78).

In *The Woman Warrior*, some of the events happen in Chinese history or Kingston’s family history across generations, dynasties, and even across continents, yet this work should better be understood as the intersection of modern cultural and literary ideologies that have governed Kingston’s writing. Characters are still portrayed as identifiable binary opposites: winners and losers; assimilable and unassimilable. For example, No Name Woman and Fa Mu Lan, Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid, their destinies are disparate and are determined by whether or not they choose to conform to

the norms of their societies. Kingston's sympathetic portrayal of No Name Woman does not change the inevitability of her death. Mu Lan, an avenger as she is, has fulfilled the norms of the Symbolic Order, i.e. the patriarchal society. Brave Orchid, although she does not speak English, and does not have the willingness to assimilate into the Symbolic Order, she is still an example of the "model minority." Brave Orchid seems to be never confused or ambivalent like her children or other immigrants; she holds onto the social values of China and raises her children according to them. She is diligent, strong-willed, and persistent, demonstrating some qualities that would be valued even by the dominant society. In contrast, Moon Orchid seems to be a total failure. She is afraid to speak up and socialize, completely unable to adapt to the culture of the new land, and she ends up dead in an asylum.

Li reads Kingston's strategy of dealing with racism as, unlike Chin's direct confrontation, "first accepting the East/West apartheid and then attempting to mediate within this age-old dual geography" (46). Disapproving of Chin's confrontational style, Kingston admits that she is following the tradition of American literature, and openly claims her identity as an American writer, which is a question most of her contemporary ethnic writers would avoid to talk about, "I am creating part of American literature, and I was very aware of doing that, of adding to American literature. The critics haven't recognized my work enough as another tradition of American literature" (Skenazy and Martin 72). In an interview, Kingston says that she does not want her works to be labeled as "Asian American" or "Chinese" because either label will lead to the misreading of her works as "un-American." Instead, she claims that she is "writing America" (Whalen-Bridge 80). She continues to explain that her subject matter is about the life in America,

not China, the part about China in her book being just an Asian American writer's reinvention through her imagination.

In the last chapter, Ts'ai Yen, the Chinese ancient poetess was captured by Southern Hsiung-nu barbarians and got married there. Twelve years later she returns bringing with her songs of Hsiung-nu. One of the songs is "Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," a song that Chinese people sing to their own instruments. Kingston closes this story with her comment "It translated well" (209). This very last sentence of the book can be regarded as Kingston's justification of her writing style, indicating that, she, like Ts'ai, is rewriting stories by translating Chinese culture into English for her American audience. Translation between two cultures also characterizes the writing by writers with a bicultural identity. Nevertheless, the difference between Ts'ai Yen and Kingston is, Ts'ai Yen is snatched to a foreign land as an adult, yet Kingston was born and grew up in America. She has never been to and does not have the intention to go to China. The suggestion of her identity as a translator reminds us that she is after all a foreigner instead of an insider of Chinese culture. Information may be distorted or even lost in translation, as Sau-ling Wong rightly puts it, "part of *The Woman Warrior*'s popularity has been fueled by a misplaced fascination with traditional Chinese culture, which may mean that the endeavor to produce a 'translatable' Chinese American culture is destined to be undermined by stereotyping and Orientalism" (35).

In my opinion, Kingston is more politically concerned about how to construct her own subjectivity through multiple discourses, which we can see from what she chooses to tell and how she chooses to tell. As a politically successful discourse is above all rhetorically effective, Kingston's rewriting in *The Woman Warrior* is not only a

reflection, but also her reaction to her past and present, from which we can deconstruct her political position on racism and sexism. While Chin's political position is that an ethnic writer should speak for the community, from a Bakhtinian point of view, a discourse should be made a space for the marginalized and silenced to speak for and to a community.

The textual framework of *The Woman Warrior* displays an adaptability to any context, which is a prominent quality of Chinese oral tradition. The skillful manipulation of multiple points of views is one of the influences of talk-story. A Bakhtinian view sees talk-story as a conversation between the present teller of the story and its original creator. This form of oral transmission is a form of collective storytelling, since it allows for multiple versions and generations of community members to participate. Therefore, talk-story is a suitable form to explore the voices of the people of Chinese ancestry. As it is, Maxine's own sense of self is intricately linked to an ability to speak and be heard through storytelling. Brave Orchid in her own voice reiterates the community stories to Maxine; Maxine is an American listener as well as a storyteller. When Kingston rewrites these stories, she enters a dialogue with her mother; she becomes a collaborative author of her mother's stories. As Maxine says, "[h]ere is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also talk story. The beginning is hers, the ending mine" (206). As young Maxine's subjectivity is largely established by Brave Orchid's stories, in the same way the author Kingston influences her American audience.

This oral narrative form satisfies Kingston's desire for freedom in terms of choosing what to tell and how to tell. For example, Maxine's brother drives Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid to Los Angeles to see Moon Orchid's husband in the hope of saving



her marriage. Maxine doesn't go with them; she tells us that she hears the story from her brother, but then she denies, "In fact, it wasn't me my brother told about going to Los Angeles; one of my sisters told me what he'd told her. His version of the story may be better than mine because of its bareness, not twisted into designs." (163). Apparently Maxine is not a reliable narrator here. In fact, throughout the book, Brave Orchid's reliability as storyteller who does most of the storytelling is not convincing either. The way she talk-stories often confuses and misleads Maxine. It takes a long time for Maxine to figure out that not all that her mother tells her is truthful. It's just one of the multiple versions of a story, and she has to figure out by herself what the truth is by listening to different accounts. Talk-stories could be full of ambivalences and contradictions, but their power lies in the fact that they encourage the reader to make his own judgment by listening to different voices instead of one single voice.

Bakhtin, based on his theory of dialogism, formulates two major modes of discourse, authoritative discourse and internally persuasive discourse. In his book *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Bakhtin defines authoritative discourse against internally persuasive discourse, "[t]he authoritative word demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally" (342). According to Bakhtin, an internally persuasive discourse is "tightly interwoven with 'one's own word,'" which makes it possible to bring together different ideas and hence is a dialogic discourse (342). Talk-story is something akin to Bakhtin's notion of an "internally persuasive" discourse in that the oral narrative is open-ended and its open-endedness allows intersection, interjection, and adaption. Bakhtin clarifies, "The semantic structure of an internally persuasive discourse is not finite, it is

open; in each of the new contexts and dialogize it, this discourse is able to reveal ever new ways to mean” (345). However, in contrast, authoritative discourse, which is “fundamentally intractable as it prescribes dictatorially and resists interrogation,” does not have the dialogic nature (345). It draws its ideology on previously established and accepted texts so that “its authority was already acknowledged in the past” (345). In this sense it is a “prior discourse” (345). Bakhtin indicates that authoritative discourse “demands our unconditional allegiance” (345). Unlike internally persuasive discourse, authoritative discourse is not open to intersection or collaboration. On the contrary, it is static “for it is fully complete” and has but a single meaning” (345).

The demand for authenticity in the literary representation of ethnic cultures, in some sense, is an insistence on authoritative discourse, without considering the goal of literature itself. Chin’s is in essence denying dialogism and the writer’s own creativity. Oral discourse, unlike printed text, which does not permit change and collaboration, is an internally persuasive discourse, one that is “half-ours and half someone else’s” (345). The famous Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, when talking about African oral tradition, mentions the difference between oral narratives and printed texts: “One of the most critical consequences of the transition from oral traditions to written forms of literature is the emergence of individual authorship. The story told by the fireside does not belong to the storyteller once he has let it out of his mouth. But the story composed by his spiritual descendent, the writer in his study, ‘belongs’ to its composer” (47). Accordingly, talk-stories are not supposed to be used to record culture and history, but to engage others in an attempt to create and reinforce shared meaning for the entire community.

Also talk-story is a “collective storytelling” that is “counter-hegemonic narratives” (Smith xxi). *The Woman Warrior* is an internally persuasive discourse because its employment of talk-stories breaks down the power of the approved stories. Kingston actually shows her contempt for verbatim transcription of stories, which she considers as “ancestor worship” (Pfaff 26). She asserts, “We have to do more than record myth... The way I keep the old Chinese myths alive is by telling them in a new American way” (Pfaff 26). Talk-story’s collaborative approach to text helps the author to seek a more inclusive readership as well, which we can see in terms of readership in the following remark by Kingston: “I want my audience to include everyone. I had planned that if I could not find an American publisher, I would send the manuscript to Britain, Hong Kong, Canada, Taiwan—anywhere—and if it did not then find a publisher, I would keep it safe for posthumous publication, so I do believe in the timelessness and universality of individual vision. It would not just be a family book or an American book or a woman’s book but a world book, and at the same moment, my book” (“Cultural Mis-readings” 64-65).

The political implications of *The Woman Warrior* are obvious. Kingston’s adoption of talk-story as a narrative method enables her to actively combat stereotyping. Due to the flexibility and extemporaneousness of talk-story, it is difficult for readers to predict the development of the plotline as well as the author’s intention, and therefore it is difficult for them to stereotype as they often do so in their reading of a typical ethnic autobiography. Kingston’s choice of talk-story is at the same time her rejection of conventional literary form, and hence is her rejection of stereotypes. Also Kingston gives new definition to womanhood by rewriting stories about women in Chinese history and

her life. Her rewriting to some extent challenges the negative definition of womanhood. Most importantly, talk-story helps her to fashion a voice for herself in a culture where ethnic female writers are marginalized. The new language Kingston has invented in *The Woman Warrior* challenges the generic convention and thus has a subversive potential because it “put[s] discourse into question” and “reject[s] the existing order” (*F éral* 88). By “laying claim to an absolute difference, posited not within the norm but against and *outside* the norms,” Kingston talks back to the designated identity of racial and sexual Other (*F éral* 88).

Wong, when often compared with Kingston, is considered to be less famous and less significant. Today *Fifth Chinese Daughter* is too superficial and too conventional to many critics. As Lim specifically points out, “[b]etween *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *The Woman Warrior* is a breathtaking leap in female consciousness” (263). However, we should know that Wong used to be the most successful Chinese-American writer of her time back in 1950s because of her *Fifth Chinese Daughter*. It is just that the scholarly opinion has undergone a radical transformation in its attitude toward ethnic literature and Wong has gradually lost critical favor. In order to do justice to Wong, the limitations of her gender and ethnic consciousness in her book should be read in her social context: she is in a much more oppressive and hostile social reality, lacking of a tradition of female literature to draw on. Despite of all the obstacles she faces, Wong summons up her courage to find a voice to speak for Chinese-American women in a monolingual society. Her heritage still influences the works of subsequent women writers. She is the forerunner of Kingston, so to speak. As Kingston says, “I am not sure that I got help from former generation of Chinese-American writers except for Jade Snow Wong; actually her

book was the only available one” (Lim 11). Without Wong being before her, perhaps Kingston’s liberatory aspirations would not have been possible, nor would it have been possible for us to see in her that “leap in female consciousness” (Lim 263).

## CHAPTER V

### TALKING TO LEARN

One's destination is never a place, but a way of seeing things.

—Henry Miller

Back some years ago, I had never thought I would be connected to a place named Normal until I received a teaching assistantship from the English Department of Illinois State University. When I'm writing this in Beijing, I have left Normal for four years. But I feel everything in there has never been far away from me. Amid the hustle and bustle of the big city, I often think of my PhD life in that lonesome town. It was the first and the only place I lived in in America. I was there for four and a half years. So, to me, it is America.

I still remember it was on August 7, 2006, I took off from the city of Chengdu in the southwest of China. Three hours later, the flight made its transfer in Incheon International Airport, the stop lasted seven hours before it resumed the rest of the journey. It took another seven hours until the plane eventually landed in O'Hare International Airport. I was already in America. But I felt more exhausted than excited.

It was my first intercultural trip. In the two hours that followed, everything seemed to proceed without a hitch, that is to say, I wasn't so culturally shocked. People looked very American like what I saw in American movies and soap operas. Officers

were nicer than imagined, I had no difficulty asking for directions. Thank god, my English was good enough. Then I was taken by the red charter bus toward my destination, where I started my new life in America. I was so full of hope.

It's been nine years since then. At that time, unlike other graduate students who came to this program with a clear plan, I didn't have very decided views about my future. When I left China, I didn't know what I exactly wanted, but I knew what I didn't want. I was teaching in the English department of a university, unhappy with China's test-oriented education system and tired of a life that taught me nothing. What's more, I could not bear the thought of teaching English grammar for the rest of my life. All of this nursed in me a great eagerness to go somewhere else. Perhaps PhD study didn't interest me that much, but it gave me the chance of living in America.

My American life soon lost some of its romance for me. It took two weeks to fight the jet lag, which made me completely disoriented. I was so out of place at the new instructors' orientation that began on the third day of my arrival. I dozed through almost the whole ten-day orientation that trained new graduate assistants how to teach a first-year course English 101. English 101 was something new to me. Even American graduates were not familiar with it. I was awkward and uneasy, trying hard to figure out what people were talking about and remember their names. At first I called Dr. Broad "Bob," like some American students did. Then I realized that it made me feel very uncomfortable. I went back to my Chinese way and called him Dr. Broad. In the following four years, I addressed every professor by their titles and only called staff members by their first names.

It turned out that my PhD life had seldom been like what I had imagined they would be when I was in China. I could hardly get fully engaged in my study since a great deal of my time was occupied by teaching English 101. I had to teach two sections consisting of 46 students. The core idea of English 101 was “writing is a process instead of a product.” Each student would turn in a packet at the end of every unit containing six to seven items, altogether 20 to 30 pages produced in the writing process from prewriting to the final draft. Instructors were supposed to supervise the whole process and write margin and end comments. Grading was strenuous. I still remember my first grading experience in a training at the university’s writing center. It took me nearly 30 minutes to finish reading a two-page draft and figure out a grade. I knew every word on the draft, it just looked so “foreign” to me: Chinese students wouldn’t openly discuss teenage pregnancy in a writing test because they were too unconcerned with social issues in a culturally and politically restrictive environment. But American students were free to address a wide range of topics such as the legalization of marijuana, school uniform, legal drinking age, high school sex, abortion, steroid use in sports, etc., which were all very unfamiliar to me. I had no idea how to respond to them.

Normally international instructors face complex issues in teaching. For me, it was not until two years later that teaching became not that intimidating, but I had never completely come to terms with my identity as an international instructor in an American classroom. I believe that the stress basically came from my language ability. Class discussions were often bogged down by lack of sufficient comprehension and slow response. I often missed students’ questions. Sometimes I had to ask them to slow down or rephrase what they said because they spoke too fast or their English was too strange to



my ears. I tried hard to abandon the stiff and bookish English I used to use in China and expose myself to an English that was different but more dynamic, idiosyncratic and flexible. My confidence was gone when I was more concerned with my strangeness and the absurdity of my inquiry than the effective interactions between me and my students.

I remember once we were having this discussion about family history. A girl named Britney said that she came from a Russian immigrant family; they were Jews (this was the first time I learned that there were Jews in Russia). She said that her family never went to church. I asked unthinkingly, “Why?” She was unhappy with my reaction and answered “Perhaps we are not good Jewish people.” Another boy Richard told the class that he actually was a Swedish descendant, but his family name was “Sparks,” which didn’t sound like Swedish at all, because his grandparents had changed their name to Sparks when they first arrived in America. I was curious and asked why did they want to change their name? He appeared very uncomfortable as if I asked a very stupid question, and said it was an Anglophone name. They changed their name in order to better fit into American life.

This happened a lot. I was often susceptible to the embarrassment and frustration in my teaching class. That idea of out-of-placeness was something I felt about myself. Whenever I had to go to my teaching classes, that feeling became more acute. I couldn’t sleep well if I had to teach the next day. My anxiety would last until I was done with my teaching, so I always preferred morning classes; I preferred to get it over with earlier. The only way I could handle this problem was to spend more time preparing for my teaching. But another problem arose: I couldn’t treat my studying and teaching 100 percent at the

same time. I didn't want to do both half-heartedly either. Sometimes I was thinking if I didn't have to teach independently at the beginning, my stress level would have been greatly reduced. I should have been a teaching assistant to a literature professor so that I could learn something related to my own interest, and could better prepare myself for my internship class two and a half years later.

In the spring of 2009, I taught a literature course titled "Migration Narrative." My interest in exploring migration in a literature course was intended to lead students to look at the nature of American culture through a new lens. English professors Eleanor Kutz and Hepzibah Roskelly argue that it is important that English educators engage their students in the examination of the cultural changes that have happened over time so that they can better contribute to changing of the world. Migration, as the quintessential American experience in American history, has affected every aspect of American culture. The national culture and literature of America to a great extent is built upon migration experiences, as Salman Rushdie notes, "America, a nation of immigrants, has created great literature out of the phenomenon of cultural transplantation, out of examining the ways in which people cope with a new world" (20). As we entered an era of globalization in the twenty-first century, the issues emerging from transnational migration or border-crossing have increasingly been of interest in literature and cultural studies and other related fields. Literature is therefore becoming "increasingly postnational" and being defined "less by a nation than by a language, in which authors from a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds write" (Jay 33).

This shift of the status of culture and literature has informed university curricula and the literary canon, which are still dominated by “an aesthetic and ideological consensus about culture and identity” and “superficial cultural homogeneity” (Jay 33). Migration literature that is often discussed in terms such as *transnational*, *ethnic*, *immigrant*, *diasporic*, *exilic* still “operates outside the national canon” (Seyhan 10). Fortunately, more and more scholars have begun to question the mentality of a unified national identity. Amritijit Singh points out, “[T]o search for a single ‘origin’ of the ‘American self’ has become considerably more problematic than it was a generation ago” (viii). Lauter advocates understanding American literature as a comparative literature instead of a national literature and believes the literary heritage of each racial/ethnic group must be treated as an equally important constituent. Lauter’s point of equality is echoed by Taylor’s confrontation with the traditional concept that the United States is a “melting-pot society.” This concept, according to him, normalizes a myth of uniform “Americanness” immigrant groups seek to assimilate (Alieas 253). Bhabha also shares the common ground of Lauter and Taylor, “the very concept of homogenous national cultures the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions, or ‘organic’ ethnic communities—as *the grounds of cultural comparativism*—are in a profound process of redefinition” (7). Said calls attention to works that fall out of the Western literary canon “with an effort to draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally presented or ideologically represented in such works” (66).

Migrant narratives situated in a myriad of historical and cultural contexts require that students learn to read comparatively. The writers I selected for class discussions are all migrants themselves. However, they fall into two distinctive categories: the native

writers who write in their first language, and nonnative writers who write in English as a second language. I identify more with the latter group of writers. I make the distinction based on language, which is also my research interest, because I think migration narrative is a discourse in which language style plays an instrumental role. The question of national identity arises only when people cross national borders. The establishment of national identity first and foremost depends on language, which serves to unite multi-ethnic groups into a nation. Benedict Anderson in his book *Imagined Communities* explains that each nation is an imagined community and “from the start of the nation was conceived in language, not in blood, and that one could be ‘invited into’ the imagined community” (145). The identity of migrant writers, where they are from, what language they speak, matters when it comes to how they represent migration experiences. It provides an interesting perspective from which we look at how migrant people’s identities are shaped in an imagined language community.

Nonnative writers’ narratives are characterized by an unorthodox pattern of English, called by the cultural studies scholar Evelyn Nien-Ming Chi’en “weird English,” in which the influence of the writer’s native language is noticeable. This weird English, according to Chi’en, is the result of the “bi- or polycultural status and context” of the authors and the characters they create, and is “a conscious appropriation of hybridity” (4). Like Chambers describes, migrancy is a discourse forcing “a dwelling in language” (5). Immersion in a foreign language causes the disruption of identity. This disruption of identity is something in common between this group of writers and the characters they portray, which accounts for the fact that immigrants’ invisible and silenced world in native writers’ works could be rendered visible and vocal by nonnative writers.

Therefore, this course was meant to expose my students to an array of migrant narratives, to elicit their cognitive as well as affective responses to the various hardships migrant people faced in their attempt to settle in a new culture, and most importantly, to get them to think about the complexity of reconstructing and redefining their identities as undergone through their transnational, translingual and transcultural experiences, as vividly described by Salman Rushdie:

The effect of mass migrations has been the creation of radically new types of human being: people who root themselves in ideas rather than places, in memories as such as in material things; people who have been obliged to defend themselves—because they are so defined by others—by their otherness; people in whose deepest selves strange fusions occur, unprecedented unions between what they were and where they find themselves. (124-25)

I don't know if this is common to all the professors when they were teaching literature for the first time. That is, no matter how much homework you have done beforehand, reading primary texts, theories, and a number of secondary sources, you still feel you are not much of a teacher when you at last stand in the classroom facing your students. You still feel you have not prepared to teach—you still feel like the other.

My situation was even more complicated. Teaching literature was a far more daunting task for me than I expected, although I had accumulated some teaching experience and skills from English 101. Again whenever the time approached for me to go to the class, my anxiety level would rise. Many times I regretted switching my area of study from linguistics to literature that I had naively thought would be more interesting

and more worthwhile for the five-year PhD studies. However, the overwhelming challenges and growing frustration easily overshadowed the initial excitement I had about this program that allowed me to make the change. It was no use to complain. I had to teach literature.

Although I had been exposed to a lot of professors, lectures, and seminars in the past two years, I didn't have the least idea of what a literature class should be like on an undergraduate level since there was little discussion about what might be involved in teaching literature. Nor did the department provide the opportunity for me to sit in a class to learn. My only experience was the two survey classes I took in China when I was a junior. So the first thing I tried to figure out was how an American literature class would be different from one in an ESL environment. I often had to do this kind of code-switching, yet it was still hard to imagine: I would teach native speakers literature in English. It was a huge transition. No doubt language was going to be the biggest problem I would encounter.

Soon I found I was wrong. The first challenge I confronted was to revise the syllabus because, when I was writing it, I took it for granted that students enrolled in the class would be English majors. Now I was told by my students that English 125 Literary Narrative was a general education class required by other departments of their students. The whole class protested that the course load was too heavy for a Gen. Ed class as if they were not doing other courses at the same time. According to the original syllabus, beside assigned readings, students would write weekly responses, take weekly quizzes, mid-term and final exams, and write mid-term and final papers. Indeed, it was a bit too

much. So I left out mid-term exam, and changed weekly quizzes to one quiz in every other week. I felt embarrassed about this—it didn't seem to be a good beginning.

Then came the real challenge that got me panicked. I did a lot of preparation and tried writing lectures out only to realize that it didn't work for me: I was too stiff and tied down to my script with no sense of audience. I didn't know how to transfer my scholarly knowledge into classroom practice, which my graduate classes definitely didn't teach me. I did give time for class discussion, but could hardly be engaged in it myself. For some reason my students and I were interested in different aspects of the books, and we interpreted the texts differently. I tended to approach the text from a holistic point of view while they always gave priority to the plot, and very often were discussing the details I overlooked or was unable to understand and therefore couldn't answer some of their questions. That caused some students to misunderstand me as dismissive. For my part, it was not my attitude, but rather my language expression that kept me from communicating effectively with them. I might be more sophisticated at grasping the major issues or concepts in the text, while my students were much more adept at the language or cultural subtleties. What I learnt from this lesson was that teaching should not be merely a technical system for knowledge delivery; classrooms should be a contact zone where the teacher interacts with students and students with each other rather than a place where the teacher lectures as the only authority. In my case, I had to figure out how to incorporate my non-native-speaker identity into the classroom and into my teaching style. So I revised the syllabus for the second time, assigning each student two presentations through the semester requesting them to send me their presentation notes and discussion questions the day before their presentation days. In this way, I was able to understand better their

mindset and supply my comments and directions. The class began to be much more efficient and informed thereafter.

While I spent a lot of time reading and doing research before I taught this class, I was less prepared to understand students' personal situations. As I taught the course, the most important lesson I discovered became: when I was setting the course goals, or writing the syllabus, I should have taken into consideration my students, their backgrounds, knowledge bases and interests. Without this consideration, there would be no basis for my teaching methodology. I admitted that I was taking things for granted. I was somewhat assuming that they would be interested in the course content because it was about their country's history. However, things turned out the opposite. A lot of students expressed frustration with the course readings and questioned the relevance of the course to their lives. Why should they read these books which seemed "alien" or "weird" to them? I was surprised to see how little they knew about America's past and very few of them showed interest in the course materials. My students' reactions not only reflect the marginalized status of migration narrative in school and university curricula but also forced me to reassess my approach. I have also learned that an instructor should justify the selection of the course topic at the beginning of the class to avoid students' confusion. Since reading is predicated upon prior knowledge, approaching migration literature appears to be a difficult task because my students had had no prior experience with this body of literature. I realized I needed to build on students' familiar knowledge to help them understand the unfamiliar, to create a link between their cultural background and what they were learning, and familiarize them with the context of migration phenomena.



I believed Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* was a good chance to remedy this problem. The whole book is written from the point of view of an eight-year old immigrant David, who lived with his parents in an Austrian-Jewish ghetto in New York. The story centers on David's spiritual growth and development despite the harshness of his life. However, the book begins with a detailed scene with a large number of immigrants of different nationalities arriving at Ellis Island in 1907, when David was only two years old. In this section, Henry Roth abandons David's point of view and changes the limited narrator to an omniscient narrator, which seems to have nothing to do with the main content of the book. In class, I raised the questions of the inconsistency of the perspective, the relevance of this part to the plotline, and the author's purpose of presenting such a scene. Seeing that my students all looked puzzled, I stopped to show them a documentary *Immigration Through Ellis* to see what it was like when the immigrants first came to America from different parts of the world. Then I asked them to tell me their ancestors' stories, where their ancestors were from and what hardships they had been through. Realizing that it was time to talk about themselves, students began to get active. I distinctively remembered two of the students whose ancestors were from Sweden and Germany respectively had to adopt an Anglophonic family name in order to better fit in. When we finished our sharing moment and went back to the discussion of the prologue, many students thought it functioned to contextualize the events in the novel. The prologue enables the readers to associate the immigrants with their own cultural heritages and better understand the difficulties they faced when they moved to a new country and tried to assimilate into a new culture. The documentary and class discussions also compelled students to think critically about the meaning of "being American," and invited them, as

descendants of immigrants, to assess their own attitudes toward foreign immigrants and their different cultures. This experience also laid a necessary intellectual base for the class discussion in the remainder of the course, since the books all vividly portray the struggles immigrants face with fitting in and finding their niche in the new country.

Another engaging and fun discussion occurred when we were analyzing the theme of Ha Jin's *A Free Life*. Prompted by a survey conducted by CNN in 2006 which showed 54% of the public believes that American Dream is unachievable, my students expressed their understanding of American dream and what their dreams were. The topic then changed to the competitive job market, and then naturally back to the protagonist Nan's American Dream. It proved that students liked this kind of talk; it worked great to get them to identify with immigrants' hard situation. This experience laid a necessary intellectual base for the class discussion in the remainder of the course, since the books all vividly portray the struggles immigrants face with fitting in and finding their niche in the new country.

Of all the books we read, V. S. Naipaul's *A Bend In The River* was the students' least favorite. I selected it because it is recommended by Ha Jin in his *The Write As Migrant* and it is the book that has influenced him most. I was interested to find the connection between Jin and Naipaul that might give me some insight into my future research. Students' indifference to a book set in Africa was largely due to their very limited knowledge of Africa. A class survey showed that their impression of Africa was "hot, desert, diseases," and what surprised me most was that the majority of the class didn't know Africa was a continent; they thought it was a country. I reminded the class

there was at least one thing they should not forget about Africa, that is, President Obama's father was from an African country. Another thing was that Sarah Palin also mistook Africa for a country, which is why she couldn't be the vice president of the United States. The whole class laughed. This kind of activity helped a lot because it immediately engaged the students with the major intellectual practices I wanted my students to acquire, especially in terms of convincing them that they had entered into a meaningful course, a literature course not detached from their own life and experiences. Students also expressed their change of attitude toward the class in their final papers. Many confusions at the beginning of the class had been cleared up. When the semester finally came to an end, the students realized that all the books we read had taught them a lot about immigration experiences, and they felt more sympathetic to immigrants after they had seen through multiple characters' eyes the struggle and hardships they went through every day.

I realized that it was important in this class to raise students' awareness of different cultures and increase their cultural sensitivity. Thus I emphasized that migrant characters should be examined by placing them in a historical and cultural context. In doing so, I was trying to change their habit of always giving priority to plot yet not paying enough attention to contextual factors. I also explained to the students why they must move beyond the text to reach its cultural and historical background for deeper understanding. For example, without the knowledge of the Holocaust, students can hardly comprehend how the memory of it could become such an unbearable burden that has been tormenting the protagonist in each story of *The Emigrants* so much that it causes their ultimate suicides. Ellis Island is another basic piece of information that has almost

become a symbol of entrance to freedom. It is something we can use to connect the readings to each other because it is the first stop for all the immigrant characters who arrived in the United States for a better life. Students should know that from the end of the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, it was exactly through Ellis Island that immigrants from various countries enter America and settle down in different places of this new country.

*A Bend In The River* is the only one that is set in Africa and has little connection with America. It is certainly not a novel for students who tend to prefer books with a lot of plot. It needs more sophisticated reading because, although it is full of events, the whole book seems to be held together more by the author's reflections, observations and generalizations. It's almost unreadable if the readers don't know anything about the history and politics of Africa. These questions must be figured out in order to comprehend the book: who is the Big Man? Why are those Europeans here? What is the identity of those Indian-Africans? What is the bushmen's life like? What kind of place is the New Domain? These questions form the basis of context for the students to read the novel.

*To* answer these questions, we had to trace the history of Africa back to 1000 AD when Indian immigrants arrived on the East African coast, and later the colonization of Africa, "the Scramble for Africa" before the First World War when Africa was divided up like a piece of cake by a few European countries. With this background information, I helped students identify three categories of characters in the book: the bushmen (native Africans), the Indian-Africans (non-native immigrants), and European colonists—who

are also immigrants. And there are three existential worlds: (1). the African bush where the bushmen are living; (2). Salim's town, a modern place where the protagonist lives and he sees no hope; (3). the New Domain, the university city and research center, an imitation of western culture created by the dictator the Big Man whose archetype is Zaire's former president Mobutu Sese Seko. This contextualization facilitated students' understanding of the impact of westernization on people's lives in central Africa in the 1970s.

I also provided the class with some concepts to illuminate their reading: terms such as "homeland," "identity," "migrant" and "displacement." I defined the concepts and asked students to explore their meanings in the text. For example, one of the themes of the novel is the search for home: almost all the major characters in the book lack of the sense of home. Indian Africans like Salim feel that they are Indians to African people and they are Africans to Indians; they don't know where they should belong to. To the native Africans, this country is no more like their home; it has become a westernized place they have to adapt to. The white man Raymond, the Big Man's consultant, also has to seek employment and find a home outside his home country. For all the migrants, homeland is a place they often look back at, yet at the same time they have to struggle to fit in their life in the new country. Like Salim, they find it's hard to assimilate, and they always feel physically as well as culturally out of place.

While the students enjoyed very much my analysis, teaching preparation became an exhausting task for me. I had to spend a lot of time doing research. I felt frustrated that all our understanding of the primary text had to rely a lot upon outside references. While

I agree that we must teach students how to read literatures in cultural contexts, which is convenient for the readers to identify particular patterns, and this method moves students beyond comfortable New Critical close-reading to consider social structure and historical circumstances, I'm afraid that our discussion of *the Emigrants*, *A Free Life*, and *A Bend in the River* involved too many political issues such as the holocaust, the Tian AnMan Square massacre in 1989, the colonization of Africa, and I was afraid I was overtly politicizing the classroom. With the focus on cultural and political issues, I felt the loss of literature. In other words, honestly, it was kind of frustrating to find out that migrant literature can only embody inherent issues that are rather sober and depressing. Can teaching this kind of stuff be joyful, optimistic and hopeful?

On the other hand I didn't want to abandon New Criticism's close reading that was my emphasis at the beginning of the class. I still think close reading is a valuable exercise. Without it, I find it is hard to fulfill the teaching goal of exploring the formal features of the texts. Sometimes I felt confused about the significance of analyzing the text in this traditional way, since it's irrelevant to the outside cultural issues toward which students are oriented. Was there a way of teaching students how to bridge the skills of traditional close reading with other kinds of reading that point directly to historical and cultural issues?

Language is always the central issue in mutual understanding between people from different cultures. Many of my students not only tended to stereotype or undervalue the linguistically or culturally marginalized characters, but students also felt very uncomfortable with my teaching, because I was from a different culture who also spoke

“weird” English and had a thick accent like immigrants in the textbooks. Since I didn't grow up in this country, it was hard for me to grasp the idioms, metaphors or cultural subtleties in our discussions. By speaking the same language, we interpret things in similar ways. Cultural sharedness is difficult to acquire if we speak different languages. The cultural theorist Stuart Hall defines culture in terms of “shared meaning or shared conceptual maps” (18). To understand a culture is to understand how meaning is produced in the signifying system of the language spoken in that culture. One's identity is basically a cultural construction to which language is vital. As the limits of migrant characters' English constrict their cognitive understanding of the new culture, the same barrier also existed between me and my students. I felt in order to engage my students in learning, I had to first figure out how to incorporate my non-native speaker identity into my teaching.

The Brazilian educator Paulo Freire argues for the crucial role language plays in people's interaction with their world. Based on this argument, he proposes that a multicultural environment should be created in the classroom, and a dialogical relationship should be established between the teacher and the students. In order to achieve this purpose, it is the teacher's responsibility to recognize students' diverse historical and cultural backgrounds in which they have grown up, and the language they use to communicate. Freire also suggests the teacher should consider teaching as a learning process; the teacher can also learn from the students, which is beneficial to the teacher's own growth. The teacher and students “both are simultaneously teachers and students” (53). Kutz and Roskelly, in their book *An Unquiet Pedagogy*, recommend the similar approach in order to create a multicultural classroom: the teacher should keep in

mind that the students are from different home communities, “home and school ways of knowing and speaking are significantly different,” and let students participate as freely as they do in their home communities (14). The challenge is thus, as Kutz and Roskelly point out, how to respect each student’s cultural identity and how to engage students in learning by creating a participatory classroom environment. I realized that only in such an environment, students’ minds could be opened to new ways of relating the course content to their own lives and stop being resistant to me and my teaching.

Another inspiration came from bell hooks’s engaged pedagogy. For bell hooks, education should enable students to question and ultimately be able to liberate them from the dominant paradigms and ideologies which are detrimental to their intellectual creativities. Teaching, hooks thinks, should empower the students in this kind of questioning. To achieve this pedagogical goal, the classroom should be made a place which allows for the mutual participation of the teacher and students, diverse ways of knowing, and self-actualization. The teacher should keep in mind that “you are not the captain working with them,” but “just another crew member—and not a reliable one at that” (114). hooks argues that the class is like a community; the excitement for learning can be obtained only when each of its members is respectfully listened to, their contributions valued. This ecstasy in learning also has a transformative power for the students as well as the teacher to make significant change. hooks also contends that the proper stance the teacher should always be taking is “to work consistently against the politics of racism, sexism, heterosexism” (36-37). The selection of migration as the subject matter inevitably involves the elements of identity, race and ethnicity, the discussion of which can hardly be politically neutral. At the beginning, there could be a



distinct split between me and the students in our ways of knowing, due to our different ethnic and cultural background. However, there also lies the potential power of transformative pedagogy, which hooks sees based on a respect for multiculturalism. The constant interrogation of the entrenched notions, the exploration of boundaries can “create a climate of openness and intellectual rigor,” and thus makes us more receptive to different opinions (40).

My intention to create a multicultural and dialogical classroom made me change the lecture format of the class and give more autonomy to students. With students’ presentation notes, I was able to prepare for the class based on the students’ needs. For example, in our discussion of Ha Jin’s *A Free Life*, two students sent me their notes in which they questioned the relationship between the protagonist Nan and his wife Ping Ping. Nan, after being married many years, is still obsessed with his ex-girlfriend. However, both Nan and Ping Ping refuse to divorce even though this is not a secret between them. I learned that this relationship was very strange to American students. They told me, in American culture, Nan and his wife would have been expected to divorce or to have an affair. This question offered a good opportunity to make a comparison between Chinese and American cultures with regard to family dynamics. I did some research and gave a mini-lecture about Confucianism and Chinese family relationship right after the students did their presentations. I explained to the class that the Confucian belief about family that had influenced China for over 2000 years. According to Confucianism, family is the basic unit of humanity, it is the basis of social harmony and individual success. Divorce, by convention, is a family disgrace. In today’s China, although the rate of divorce is going up, traditional couples still consider divorce a big

risk, and normally would try to maintain the relationship for their children's sake. When Nan and Ping Ping move to America, family becomes more important to them. They still feel they are the most reliable people for each other. That's why they don't want a divorce. My students told me without explanation that they would have never been able to understand the characters in this book. But, with the lessons about Confucianism, they understood the characters' motive better. This method of contextualizing the plot proved to be very effective; it made us want to learn from each other, and listen to each other.

As an instructor teaching literature for the first time, I gave a lot of thought to whether I should teach literary theory and how it should be taught. This is actually a question almost every literature teacher can't avoid when he/she designs the curriculum. Educators vary in their stances on this issue. No doubt, literary theory has enriched literature teaching; literary theory has also resulted in some scholars' obsession with it and estrangement from primary texts. I agree with scholars like Hermione Lee and Ciaran Cosgrove who give priority to primary texts and argue that reading critical texts will influence students' understanding and develop an over-reliance upon secondary materials, which is detrimental to their intellectual creativity and self-reliance. The close reading of the primary text, according to Cosgrove, is not only to guarantee better comprehension, but also is necessary to fully enjoy the text. The enjoyment of reading can be instinctive, emotional as well as intellectual, which happens when we are trying to make sense of what we enjoy. On the other hand, I don't think teaching theory in a literary class should be rejected. Teaching as well as reading should be a process of "countering indifference" (Cosgrove 25). Students should not be allowed to indulge in "self-referentiality" that fails to develop their critical thinking ability (Blau 4). Teachers

should think about what we can equip students with so that they can analyze and critique the books they read.

Whether the primary texts or literary theory is the focus of the teaching, it is important that the students are able to experience joy. My students were undergraduate students who were all non-English majors and taking a university literature class for the first time. They are, according to Elaine Showalter, “the vulnerable, the open, the intellectually virginal, the easily bewildered, the preoccupied, who have little background, little time” (25). For such a 100-level literature class, while the primary texts should always be more emphasized, it is also the teacher’s responsibility to introduce the students some analytical skills or theoretical concepts to facilitate their learning instead of just letting them passively react to the text. I’m not opposed to jargon. I just think that jargon should be translated into common language to make it accessible to the “common reader.” In other words, jargon should be taught in a way students are able to understand and apply these concepts to their own context instead of being taught as vocabulary. Otherwise students look on teachers as “sovereign controllers, possessors of meaning” and will just be copying other people’s views, imitating their way of talking, afraid or cautious to use their own language, and hence lose their independence in thinking, which is essential in learning (Cosgrove 83). I provided my class the concepts I mentioned above that were essential to understanding migrant narrative to illuminate their reading—”homeland,” “identity,” “migrant,” and “displacement,” but I defined the concepts and asked students to explore their meanings in the text. For example, one of the themes of *A Bend in the River* is the search for home: almost all the major characters in the book lack the sense of home. Indian Africans like Salim feel they are Indians to African people and

they are Africans to Indians, they don't know where they should belong. To the native Africans, this country is no more like their home: it has become a westernized place they have to adapt to. The white man Raymond, the Big Man's consultant also has to seek employment and find home outside his home country. For all the migrant characters, homeland is a place they often look back at, yet at the same time they have to struggle to adapt to their lives in the new country. Like Salim, they find it is hard to fit in, and always feel physically as well as culturally out of place.

I attached a lot importance to writing as well. For this class, every week students had to write a minimum 400-word response essay to their readings. For the students who hadn't had any experience with migration literature before, their discussions might be more like their spontaneous rather than considered responses, in which a lot of their previous ideologies retained, just like Freire argues, "reading the world always precedes reading the word." (35). Writing as a crucial means of thinking gives students a chance to slow down, to try to imagine the living situation of immigrants, to give attention to exploring more than just the plot, and then carefully take a position in a rhetorical situation. It gave me the chance to identify pedagogical issues before teaching as well. I usually selected some quotations from their writings as discussion prompts. I found students were more responsive and active when I used their responses as a basis for class discussion. They expressed in their final reflection essay how they liked this idea. Lindsay wrote, "We all have different theories and assumptions of everything, but listening, really listening to other people's theories allow us to become more open with what we may believe." Some other students also agreed that reading others' responses gave them another outlook at what they had read in the book and let them look at the

book in a different light. Jayne reflected, “Opening your mind and allowing consideration of others’ beliefs are important for growth, flexibility, and successfulness.”

A good example of this method was our discussion of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pnin* which turned out to be the highlight of this semester. From their weekly responses, I found that the class’s two major reactions were toward the structure and the portrayal of *Pnin*, the immigrant professor. Students complained that the story feels disjointed in an odd way and lacks any focused plot. One of the students said that “[what] I don’t really get about this book is why Nabokov introduces so many characters that aren’t very relevant to the story, and then brought in at a later time.” On the other hand, they all agreed that *Pnin* was an “odd, quirky, fidgety, awkward, clumsy...” comical character and laughed at his misuses of English. When they asked me for my opinion in the class, I told them I paid more attention to a different aspect of the book. As a non-native speaker and a linguist, I was more impressed by Nabokov’s language style in which I had identified three prominent features:

a. the recreation of idioms or clichés;

For example, “on the one hand...on the second hand...on the third hand” (16), “informer” (which he intends to mean the person who informs him) (32), “in a nutshell-in a coconut shell” (33).

b. accented English;

For example “Mrs Fire?” (Thayer) (31), “I haf nofing”(I have nothing) (61) “dzeefeecooltsee” (difficulty) (66), “afternun” (afternoon) (67).

c. Russian with translation in English in parentheses or English with Russian in parentheses.

For example: “Another Goglian person, in Miami, offered ‘a two-room apartment for non-drinker (*dlyatrezvih*), among fruit trees and flowers.’” (75).

“It was there, *slava bogu* (thank God!) Very well! He would not wear his black suit – *vot Ivsyo* (that’s all).” (19).

I think Nabokov’s purpose is not just make the readers laugh at Pnin’s frequent miscommunications, but to try to remind us of his Russian background. His demeanor and speech draw a clear picture of a man who struggles with English. I didn’t get this across to my students directly. I knew there lay the barrier according to my observation: the stereotyping of immigrants that came from the internalized assumptions which they had learned at some point in their lives.

I decided to turn the class into a linguistics class. I began with teaching them a Chinese idiom “马马虎虎” which means “ok, just so so.” After helping them figure out its actual meaning, I told them the literal meaning of this idiom. 马 means horse, and 虎 means tiger, and the whole idiom means “horse horse tiger tiger.” The class seemed to be amused, they laughed. Then I explained that native speakers would seldom bother to think about the literal meaning of idioms while non-native speakers may pay more attention. For example, non-native speakers would feel amazed when they first hear idiomatic expressions like “it rains cats and dogs,” “I could eat a horse,” etc. and tend to recreate idioms according their needs. Can it rain other animals? How about “I can eat an elephant”?

This lecture made students think that Nabokov's wording for Pnin's speech is believable. This also invited students to consider the author's identity as a migrant writer. Many students, after I gave a biographical introduction of Nabokov, believed that "Nabokov used this book as a way to implement some things of his own life." True, the issue of language would hardly be poignantly described if the writer himself did not have similar experiences: resettlement in a new country and having to use a different language. At the end of the class, I left the question to the class: is it fair to judge Pnin based on his language skills in an English-speaking world? What is he like when he speaks Russian? Nabokov unfolds Pnin's personality traits little by little. In the next class we knew from the narrator that "if his Russian was music, his English was murder" (66). His broken English causes us, through the biased eyes of the narrator, to see Pnin as a bumbling old man teaching at an American university. In reality, though, in France when the narrator meets him 20 years earlier, he is "the author of several admirable papers on Russian culture" and a man of much respect (179). Nabokov seems to deliberately misguide his readers to see Pnin from a biased view that leaves out other key components of his life. Readers laugh without thinking that coming to America and having to communicate in a different language has changed HIM. The discussion of *Pnin* also invited the whole class to look back at language as an obstacle that has the greatest effect on immigrants in all the books we had read: how it can change immigrants' personality, affect their family relationships and their relationship with the society. This discussion turned out to be the most fruitful one of the semester.

Our last discussion of the *Pnin* was primarily about the love letter Pnin writes to his ex-wife. It was easy for students to ignore it if they only cared about the plot. I had

the student who presented that day to read the letter to the class, and then urged the class to discover the aspects of Pnin's character in this letter that we couldn't get from previous chapters. Indeed, this was the first time we were able to see the inside of Pnin. The letter proves the point Nabokov is trying to make about how we can judge someone's character. He saves the letter for the end of the book so that we can see in stark contrast how different our perception of Pnin developed in a biased point of view is from his true self.

Pnin, according to Nabokov, is

a man of great moral courage, a pure man, a scholar and staunch friend, serenely wise, faithful to a single love, he never descends from a high plane of life characterized by authenticity and integrity. But handicapped and hemmed in by his incapability to learn a language, he seems a figure of fun to many an average intellectual... (Boyd 293).

This quality of Pnin we didn't see until the end of the novel. The structure of the novel serves well to further the characterization of Pnin. As some student had noticed, this is a novel about a character instead of a story. Its unconventional form can be explained by the fact that it was initially published as a series of short stories. *Pnin* artistically exhibits Nabokov's skillful use of language devices as well as delightful innovative style to effectively subvert the readers' internalized assumption about American immigrants. According to Ha Jin, Nabokov is "a supreme example of how to adapt writing to the circumstances of displacement, how to imagine and attain a place in the adopted language



while still maintaining an intimate relationship with his mother tongue, and how to face an oppressive regime with contempt, artistic integrity, and individual dignity” (57).

*Pnin* also point outs for me the potential direction for my dissertation topic: the formal representations of immigrant issues in literary text and the discussion of language and identity. I believe language barrier is the obstacle that has the greatest effect on lives of immigrants, especially first-generation immigrants.

My students and I also talked a lot about how language can change immigrants’ family relationship. In *My Ántonia*, Willa Cather’s novel about the Mid-Western immigrarnts, the Swedish couple Mr. and Mrs. Shimerda have never learned enough English to communicate with other people and they depend a lot on their children. Ántonia often has to translate conversations for their parents. In *A Free Life*, we also see the younger generation embarrassed by the awkward English of the older generation. Therefore the language barrier has caused conflict and stress in the family and the traditional hierarchies are overturned.

Language barrier also creates a rift between generations in Sigrid Nunez’s *A Feather on the Breath of God*. The narrator is a native speaker who knows very little of her parents’ native languages: Chinese and German. Her father, a Chinese immigrant, always had trouble understanding and making himself understood in English. This is the primary reason she and her father never talked much. The inadequate communication causes the narrator to grow up with emotional hardship as well as an identity crisis. In *Call It Sleep*, David’s mother Genya lives an isolated life spending most of her time at home, speaking her native language, Yiddish. Inside the home, she is comforting to

David and speaks intelligently. However, when she goes out, we see a significant change in her. For example, when she goes to pick up David from the police station, she stammers and appears very timid. The language barrier in the new country affects the way she carries herself outside the home.

Language barriers can also affect a non-native speakers' position in society and make it hard for them to do what they truly want to do. In *A Free Life*, Nan has to give up his dream of writing poetry because he can only write in English, and he will have to face “the overwhelming odds against writing in English artistically” because English is not his native language (472). He has to put down this unrealistic ideal and work in his own restaurant business in order to survive in this new country. Nan's experience is very typical of those immigrant characters who are forced to change the goal of their lives and settle for less than what they really want. The hired girls in *My Ántonia* face a similar dilemma: English is not their native language too and they had got little education themselves, so they are limited in what jobs they can take. They are just “Bohemian and Scandinavian girls [who] could not get positions as teachers, because they had had no opportunity to learn the language” (110). The language barrier also limits the hired girls' choice in marriage. The townspeople see the hired girls as “a menace to the social order” because the language barrier causes the girls not to be able to completely blend in American society (111). Mr. Shimerda also experiences a transition in his role in the old country to the new one due to the language barrier. In the old country, Mr. Shimerda had many friends and played music for many occasions in their town. His family was “respected there” (46). In America he is isolated and depressed because he cannot speak

English well. His only friends are the two Russians because they can understand each other's languages (24).

In all, by so much discussion of language barrier in the texts, I hoped that my students wouldn't take for granted immigrant characters' poor language skills, which is an almost prevailing obstacle in reality as well. I had made my students recognize that being not able to speak good English has caused their loss of capacity for social mobility. Many of the characters have had to move to the periphery of society, living marginal existences.

The class ended up giving me pretty good evaluations, much better than I expected, although the whole process was full of stress, anxiety, challenges and frustrations as well. My teaching experiences and the readings of pedagogical theory have led me to rethink the pedagogical praxis in my future teaching career. As an international instructor, I have come to poignantly realize that how important it is for both me and my American students to be aware of each other's different cultural backgrounds, to establish a dialogical relationship between the instructor and the students, and to critically question idiosyncratic ideologies that often encourage unreceptive behaviors in class.

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