

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

So Fujii for the degree of Master of Arts in English presented on June 4, 2012

Title: Changing Stories and Moving Bones: Correlation of Chinatown and Mother-Daughter Relationships in Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Ng's *Bone*.

Abstract approved: _____

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This thesis argues for significant correlations in the politics of representation of Chinatown and mother-daughter relationships in two literary texts by Maxine Hong Kingston and Fae Myenne Ng. The two novels do not follow traditional representations of Chinatown and provide critical representations of Chinatown and mother-daughter relationships. First, Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* reveals how the heroine demystifies a powerful image of her mother and a mystic image of Chinatown in a process of establishing her autonomy. Second, Ng's *Bone* describes how the heroine tries to free her mother from a dismal image of Chinatown to live her own life outside Chinatown. The analyses of representation of Chinatown and mother-daughter relationships rely on close readings of the textual motifs through a psychoanalytic framework and cultural theories.

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Changing Stories and Moving Bones: Correlation of Chinatown and Mother-Daughter
Relationships in Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Ng's *Bone*

by
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A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Arts

Presented June 4, 2012
Commencement June 2012

Master of Arts thesis of So Fujii presented on June 4, 2012.

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

So Fujii, Author

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: <i>The Woman Warrior</i>	20
Chapter 3: <i>Bone</i>	50
Chapter 4: Conclusion.....	83
Works Cited.....	86

Changing Stories and Moving Bones: Correlation of Chinatown and Mother-Daughter Relationships in Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Ng's *Bone*

Chapter 1: Introduction

i. "Reading My Obituary": A Politics of Representation

Chinese American literature is too often used as a textbook for American college students to understand Chinese or Chinese American culture. A novel, a creative work of an artist, is interpreted as an authentic resource of an ethnic culture. Amy Tan says, "My editor at Putnam's tells me that over the years she has received hundreds of permissions requests from publishers of college textbooks and multicultural anthologies, all of them wishing to reprint my work for educational purposes" ("Required Readings" 5). According to Tan, such textbooks would have questions like this: "If you are invited to a Chinese family's house for dinner, should you bring a bottle of wine?" ("Required Readings" 5). Tan's artistic representation of a Chinese American woman's experience is interpreted as a cultural guide book.

The story of Tan's anthologized excerpts in other books shows her irritation that her novel is being often misunderstood as cultural instructions. Questions like the above reduce Tan's representation of Chinese American life to singular and potentially stereotyped images of Asian American, and given her popularity, the images of Asian

Americans could be widespread in the mainstream culture. But Amy Tan is not the only novelist whose writing has been reductively read and interpreted as representing a static image of Asian American cultures. Shirley Geok-lin Lim has written that Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* is known as the most highly taught text in American colleges, "crossing disciplines such as English, anthropology, sociology, history, women's studies, and more" (*The Woman Warrior: Her Planetary Asian American Imagination* 4). Although I believe that literary texts could be utilized to explain and investigate cultural and historical contexts of certain ethnicities not shown in census data or official records, it would be problematic to use novels as an authentic insider source of informational facts or universal truth about a certain race or ethnic group.

Youngsuk Chae's *Politicizing Asian American Literature* is a work of criticism that addresses the problem I argue above. In the book, a novel is considered as a perfect mirror of social conditions and not as an artistic interpretation of it. Chae puts a high value on *The Woman Warrior* and *Bone* for their depiction of Asian Americans' economically and thus politically low status, while rejecting *The Joy Luck Club* as "an extension of her [Tan's] business writing approach in that she draws attention strategically from readers, while theatricalizing Chinese cultures as 'exotic spectacles'" (45). Although I strongly agree with her argument that shallow multiculturalism's

irresponsible celebration of difference hides the novel's misrepresentations of exploited immigrants, her rejection of Tan and *The Joy Luck Club* as an Orientalist and an Orientalist-appealing novel could result in narrowing the reading range of Asian American literature.

Some Chinese American writers also criticize the fact that the Asian American literary text is treated as an authentic source of the ethnic culture. Recognizing that it is indeed an honor for her novel to be selected for Required Reading Lists, Tan says, "Yet I'm also not altogether comfortable about my book's inclusion on Required Reading Lists" ("Required Readings" 6) because she knows that in a process of book selection a certain image of ethnic minorities is constructed by anyone involved with it. Tan compares the reception of her work and its oversimplification to reading her own obituary. About students who study not only her books, but about herself, Tan says, "I find these academic revelations quite strange, as if I were in a Dickensian story reading my obituary" ("Required Readings" 5). This line struck me because it sounds like even though she is alive, she has no right to say anything about students' interpretation of her works. As a living writer, she could argue against the students, but the phrase, "reading my obituary," implies that not only authors themselves, but also Asian Americans might have no right to object against those who describe or comment on them. It is as if they were dead.

The dilemma of “reading my obituary” could be paraphrased as a more general problem: in reading novels as authentic, scientific sources of ethnic cultures, Asian American or Asian immigrants could become a silent object of knowledge and investigation. They are examined and researched, but have no chance to argue against the result of the examination. They are museumized like a fossil, and their representation takes the form of fixed images, which easily turn into stereotypes. The Required Reading List could reduce Asian American literature into an exotic body, which is not to be examined, but to be used as fixed images for Asian (American) people disguised as scientific, authentic discourses. As Homi Bhabha says, “An important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of ‘fixity’ in the ideological construction of otherness” (18), and fixation not only produces a cultural other, but also justifies certain discourse’s dominance over the other.

Against these attempts to construct fixed representations of Chinese Americans, novelist Fae Myenne Ng says “I can’t write about all of China” to the Chinese community who criticize her novel for its insufficient representation of Chinese Americans (Arias et al). Kingston also says, “Why must I ‘represent’ anyone besides myself?” (“Cultural Mis-readings” 101). Similar to Tan in “Required Readings,” the writers I focus on in this thesis claim artistic freedom and reject writing novel as propaganda. Contrary to the many who think these novels provide

Chinese American cultural information, these Chinese American women writers try to represent their own unique views.

In my thesis, I am arguing that Kingston's *Woman Warrior* and Ng's *Bone* resent the tendency to oversimplify the representation of Asian American reality and experience. In these two novels, Chinese American daughter heroines try to see the Chinese-born mothers beyond their culturally distorted images and also try to disentangle them from politically and culturally shaped images of American Chinatown. The heroines try to dislodge traditional or dominant narratives that surround representations of the mothers and of Chinatowns. Chinatown and mother-daughter relationships are recurring motifs in Chinese American women's representations including literary texts or movies. Kingston's question about a politics of representation for Asian American writing is aptly rephrased in an academic way by literary critic Aijun Zhu. Zhu, in her argument of artistic freedom in literary representations, says, "Why must I read (women) authors of colour into the confinement of representational inevitability?" (57). I argue that some of the literary confinements could be found in the correlation of representations of Chinatown and the mother-daughter relationships. In the following sections, I will analyze their correlation and its function for the representation of Chinese American women.

ii. Chinatown and Chinese American Subject

Chinatown stands as the center of the mother-daughter representations and plays an important factor in representations of the Chinese American figures in general because it is often regarded as the place of their origin. Although Chinatown is a material reality for people who actually live there, it is often rather a culturally imagined space in other Americans' minds, than an actual one because obviously not every Chinese American originates from Chinatown. David Leiwei Li, a literary critic, criticizes American readers and publishers who require Asianess in Asian American writers' texts. He writes,

That Asia is a socially created space in American orientalist discourse and the discourse of Anglo-Saxon nationalism has a special impact on Asian American writers. First, Asia has historically occupied the position of the Other in Western imagination, whether civilizational or colonial, that has to be subdued or converted. Second, Asia is the superimposed homeland of Asian Americans whose allegiance to the United States, whether political or cultural, is perpetually in doubt ... Third, by the spatial logic of the previous two points, Asia is the proper site of Asian American imagination ... it is supposed to epitomize and embody *the* natural experience and essence of Asian Americans. (186)

To some extent, we could replace "Asia" with "Chinatown" in Li's argument because Chinatown is often perceived as a miniaturized version of old China. As in Ng's *Bone*, however, Chinatown is not a homogenous place exclusively for Chinese Americans, but for other racial minorities such as Peruvians. However, through Chinatown, the

ghettoized identity of Chinese Americans “as perpetual house guests at best and invading vermin at worst” (Wong 43) is confirmed and reinforced.

One source of the problematic representations of Chinatown in relation to the mother-daughter relationships is the feminization of Chinatown. The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act forced Chinamen to leave their wives in China and their male subject position as husbands become unstable in America. In addition, their jobs in America which were traditionally assigned to women, such as waiter or laundry worker, reduced their cultural status to feminine subject position. As a result, the association of femininity with Chinatown is constructed despite recurring mention of Chinatown in the novels as the site of patriarchy filled with misogynistic phrases such as “Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds” (*The Woman Warrior* 46) or “A failed family ... Nothing but daughters” (*Bone* 1). In *The Woman Warrior* or *The Joy Luck Club*, the fathers’ presence is less significant than the mothers’, but it does not mean that patriarchal standards are loosened.

In addition to its feminized position, Chinatown in the mainstream culture is traditionally portrayed as an inscrutable, backward or immoral space by mainstream white America so that they could consider their white society as the more real, advanced and moral space. Following historian Nayan Shah, who analyzes Chinatown as a site of “queer domesticities” and “perverse spaces” (78, 79), literary critic Juliana

Chang analyzes the background of Ng's *Bone* as "a racial ghetto inhabited primarily by male "bachelors" and secondarily by a far smaller number of female 'prostitutes'" (113). She also argues that "The absence of nuclear family formation had the effect of inscribing Chinatown morality and sexuality as lewd and debauched" (113). Her analysis of Chinatown representation focuses Chinatown in a specific time period, and real, present Chinatown is actually a more complex space than its cultural imagery, but the stereotype image of Chinatown is persistent in the mainstream culture.

Chinatown in representations is marked with race and was perceived as an abhorrent and abnormal space that decent white Americans should avoid (unless they wanted voyeuristic adventures) in order to disguise their space outside Chinatown as a healthy, civilized world. One of the famous lines in the Hollywood movies, "Forget it, Jake, It's Chinatown" (*Chinatown*) reflects the mainstream perception of the place.

There are also many popular China- and Chinatown-related mysterious, evil characters such as Fu-Manchu, Charlie Chan, Dragon Lady or Song Liling in *M. Butterfly*. All of them present old China or Chinatown as a mysterious, archaic space filled with superstitions and daily strange rituals and in many cases with vice and evil. It is a place in which something corrupting and abnormal could happen. Although it has become a tourist space in a commercial culture, Chinatown still has its otherness in a negative way because in race relations Chinese Americans are still a minority, and

Chinese Americans or inhabitants of Chinatown financially depend on the tourists who are mainly “white middle-class men and women” with “the desire to see the exotic; the pull of an encounter with a different culture; the draw of slumming; and the attraction of experiencing, from a safe distance or with a police guide, racially charged urban dangers” (Berglund 5-6). Berglund’s quotation is actually about early 1900s Chinatown tourists, but it could be applied to the tourists of today. Unless they realize that Chinatown culture is rooted in American culture, their curiosity could easily turn into a stereotyped view of the Asian American as a cultural other who is either a social vermin or victim.

Whether at its best or worst (which depends on American mainstream perception), Chinese in Chinatown are marked with alterity. Being from Chinatown makes Chinese Americans de-Americanized, denies Americanness in their identities and keeps them as strange foreigners or sojourners who will leave America someday. The difficulty Chinese Americans face is well described in a line of Wayne Wang’s mother-daughter themed film, *Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart*, which says, “You can take the girl out of Chinatown, but can you take Chinatown out of the girl?” (Lowe 65). The line shows that Chinatown is something significant inside Chinese Americans’ identities that is hard to shed. This difficulty could be attributed to the American national policies and the mainstream culture. Formation of Chinese

American identities is not only a personal issue, but also a political one. The subject of Chinese Americans in Chinatown is formed through American-transformed Chineseness, which is a politically shaped characteristic of Chinese Americans.

Instead of reproducing the traditional representations of Chinatown, *Bone* criticizes Chinatown tourists' viewpoint in contrast with the reality of the inhabitants in it. The heroine, Leila, refuses to be a typical Chinese American in Chinatown that many Americans expect when she faces a very personal, private incident, the suicide of her half-sister. She also depicts her stepfather's messy hotel room which is far from the typical representations of mysterious Chinatown. In the critical representations of Chinatown, Ng in *Bone* attempts to describe Chinatown as different from the mainstream perception and representations.

As I will argue, Chinatown is often perceived as a miniaturized version of old China in films and novels transplanted to and preserved in America. But as there is no ultimate, true, authentic Chineseness even in China, and Chinatown's Chineseness is exposed to change in America, it is only an American-filtered Chineseness. And in the sense that there is no true Chineseness, it is always American-made Chineseness. In *The Woman Warrior*, the mother celebrates Chinese holidays (185), and the inhabitants tend to comply with Confucian or any other traditional codes of old China even in America. The mother, however, cannot do it in an all-Chinese way because in

the ritual she uses Seagram's 7 (185), which is a very Western product that she probably did not use in China. The codes of old China could be affected and modified by American life even though they stick to the Chinese way. Unlike Chinese in China who do not have to care about their Chineseness, Chinese in Chinatown un/consciously self-discipline their Chineseness. As there is no ultimate Chineseness, their attempt always comes short of the ideal. The two novels, *The Woman Warrior* and *Bone*, depict Chinatown by representing traditional and exotic images in a critical way.

iii. Politics of Chinatown Mothers

In Chinatown which is disciplined and organized by American immigration policies and the mainstream culture, the mother-daughter relationships in the reinforced old China's patriarchal culture become doubly problematic. Arguments about Asian American women writers' novels, especially feminist readings, often discuss and celebrate representations of relationships between mysteriously powerful mothers and spiritually weak American-born daughters who should be stimulated and revived by their mothers. Their women bonding in a patriarchal society of old China or Chinatown seems empowering for oppressed women in Chinatown because they could share their traumatic memories inside women-only groups. The tendency to

consider minority representation as a liberating, transcending idea can be found not only in the mainstream cultures, but also in academic spheres. As Rey Chow, a major authority of post-colonial and feminist critic, criticizes, Julia Kristeva feminizes China in order to criticize Western cultures in *About Chinese Women (Woman and Chinese Modernity* 5-9). Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Woman, Native, Other* is another example that prompts Western intellectuals to see culture and people of the third world as academically inspiring objects.¹ Given the popularity of Kristeva or Minh-ha, the idea of the third world countries and even Asian American communities as an inscrutable, revelatory space could be a persistent tendency. This tendency becomes clearly problematic when applied to depiction of Chinese American mother-daughter relationships because of oversimplification of actual power relations.

Although women bonding in Chinatown could empower Asian American women, I would argue that the association of Chinatown with femininity or the maternal could be a risky symptom of ghettoization of Asian American women inside Chinatown. In many interpretations of *The Joy Luck Club*, the daughters have problems in their relationship with others, or are afraid of not being loved by their

¹ In "Grandma's Story" which deals with *The Woman Warrior*, Minh-ha privileges matrilineal stories of the third world and considers it a transcending narrative source for women solidarity. When she says "The storyteller, besides being a great mother, a teacher, a poetess, a warrior, a musician, a historian, a fair, and a witch, is a healer and a protectress. Her chanting or telling of stories ... has the power of bringing us together" (140), she romanticizes a maternal figure as a pre-discursive subject with immense meanings.

mothers. The mothers, by storytelling, make them see what is wrong with their way of thinking, or imply their deep love for them. For instance, a daughter misunderstands the Joy Luck Club, the four mothers' mah jong meeting, as a "shameful Chinese custom, like the secret gathering of the Ku Klux Klan or the tom-tom dances of TV Indians preparing for war" (16) until she learns how it is important for her mother to survive a hopeless situation in wartime China. In *The Woman Warrior*, the mother's story of the swordswoman's revenge eventually becomes the daughter's weapon to fight against discrimination against her. She says, "The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar ... The idioms for *revenge* are 'report a crime' ... The reporting is the vengeance—not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words. And I have so many words—'chink' words and 'gook' words too ..." (53). The daughters consider the matrilineal heritage shameful based on culturally constructed American images of China by, for instance, "TV" until the mothers reveal their stories. The daughters' confidence as Chinese American women is regained through the mothers' secret survival stories of old China. The mothers' stories are embodied and practiced as lessons through the daughters' reality.

In popular novels such as *The Joy Luck Club*, the recurring motif of the mothers' survival stories as lessons for the daughters is a double-edged process for the mothers because even though they gain agency in the stories of their traumatic

sufferings and miraculous recoveries from plights in old China, their experience might be just exotic stories to the American-born daughters even though they take the stories as important life lessons. Therefore, it is possible to say that the mothers' powerfulness or even their realities are confined to their Chinese stories, which are no longer the reality of the daughters. The mothers usually work and live in Chinatown because of racial discrimination, and their mystical stories of old China are unraveled also in their homes in Chinatown. In *The Joy Luck Club* or *The Woman Warrior*, it is possible to say that the historical complexities of Chinese women's confinement in Chinatown is compensated and hidden by the mothers' powerful stories, and that the mothers' power is limited to Chinatown.

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

association of the mothers with Chinatown imply a maternal Chinatown. A sentimental emphasis on the mothers' power or sisterhood inside Chinatown could result in overlooking the repressive sides of Chinatown. The maternalization of Chinatown does not liberate Chinese American women, but only hides the political factors that caused confinement of Chinese American women in Chinatown.

The conception of Chinatown as a maternal space is a problem not only because it exoticizes the maternal, but it also constructs the space outside Chinatown as a paternal authoritative space which has a right to judge Chinatown. The heroine of *The Woman Warrior* "enjoy[s] the simplicity" (204) outside Chinatown although eventually she realizes that the outside world is also unreasonable and racially biased:

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

The heroine does not freely praise the external world, but depicts it in a critical and mocking way. The outside of Chinatown is where one can see things logically and rationalize mysteries. It is a space of enlightenment filled with simplicity, concreteness and being free from illogical things. She depicts the world outside Chinatown as rather monotonous and dull, but as the world outside Chinatown

explains the mysteries of Chinatown (“mysteries are for explanations”), it is possible to say that the external world is authorized to judge Chinatown while Chinatown is an object of explanation and enlightenment.

iv. Marginalized Chinatown and Daughters’ Search for Mothers

As a side effect of the association of Chinatown with the mysterious maternal, Chinatown is also turned into a pre-discursive, de-historicized world. As a result, the mother figures are pushed away into the marginalized world of unintelligible discourse. The mother figures are powerful, but only in a pre-discursive space, robbed of their reality and agency to negotiate with reality. As often seen in psychoanalytic studies of the motherhood myth such as maternal instinct, the discourse of the maternal is often sacralized and untouchable, something beyond human knowledge, thus there is no room to argue about mystic motherhood, sometimes even for mothers themselves. The sacralization of the maternal could result in marginalization of the maternal because it is treated as the unexplainable. When a certain subject, such as Chinese mothers or habitants of Chinatown, is considered as the unexplainable, it also seems like they can not explain themselves, and therefore lack singular agency.

When Chinatown is misrepresented and robbed of its inhabitants’ voices, the space outside Chinatown consequently gains authority to speak for and represent

Chinatown. As a certain space is identified with the maternal, the other spaces could be justified for having narrative dominance over the maternal space. Application of familial terms such as *mother* or *father* could automatically reduce political issues to personal, private ones. What is covered behind mystification or personification is a political matter of Chinese women's representation. Even though the mothers in *The Woman Warrior* or *The Joy Luck Club* are powerful story-tellers and overwhelm the daughters, their powerfulness in return highlights how far they have fallen from their wealthy or respected status and how they have to do menial jobs in an ethnic or racial division of labor, mistreated by a racial bias due to coming to America. Inscrutability is an excuse that hides their powerlessness. Maternalization of Chinatown conceals a politically constructed and controlled Chinatown while presenting mystic images of Chinatown, and such images only worsen Chinese American women's confinement in the marginalized space and their status of being robbed of their agency.

Because of culturally distorted images of Chinese mothers, it could be difficult for the daughter figure to see the mother's reality. As a result the daughters can not avoid struggle in relationship with the mothers especially when they try to gain autonomy from their mothers, which is often identified with their leaving Chinatown. Chinatown and mother-daughter relationships are interwoven into the politics of representation of maternal space. As many feminists have argued, mother-daughter

relationships invested with mysteriousness are political issues as well as personal ones.²

In the process of establishing their identities, daughters often see their mothers as role models. The daughters, however, suffer from conflict in choosing to follow or not to follow their mothers' gendered steps that require women to sacrifice themselves for the families. What is worse, it could be difficult even to face the conflicts because motherhood is naturalized and socially institutionalized as a keystone of many patriarchal societies. It is also culturally mystified and idealized. Considering the year 1989, a late year of Second-wave feminism, in which Marianne Hirsch's first exhaustive study of mother-daughter relationships in Western literature was published,³ the representations of mother-daughter relationships were, even for feminists, a difficult issue to tackle.

It would require a complex process to salvage mother-daughter relationships from outside the history, to historicize the relationship without mythologizing it. In a Chinatown which is culturally maternalized, this process is even more difficult because the mother-daughter relationships are repressed under multilayered

² For instance, these books politicize the mother-daughter relationships: Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*, Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* or Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*.

³ Marianne Hirsch's *Mother/Daughter Plot* is inspired by Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*. In the book, Hirsch proposes a double voice or a plot in which not only daughters, but also mothers speak instead of traditional plots in which maternal figures are marginalized in daughters' process of gaining their autonomy.

discourses of racism and sexism. In the following chapters, I'll analyze how the daughter heroines try to untangle the mothers from these multilayered silences in an effort to de-maternalize Chinatown and see the mothers' desires so that the daughters could face their own desires and gain their autonomy.

Chapter 2: *The Woman Warrior*

i. *The Woman Warrior*: Telling Other Stories

One of the problematic aspects of Asian American literature is that its body of texts is so racialized that sometimes it is hard for critics to argue beyond the controversy of race and gender. Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* is a collection of an Asian American girl/woman's life stories told through her fantasies and memories related to her relationship with her mother, Brave Orchid. It invites many readings for its themes, style and popularity. A vast body of study on the novel is, however, probably hampered by the so-called "Kingston controversy," which is "a classic example of the theoretical tension between feminism and cultural nationalism, caught in the Eurocentric discourse" (Zhu 56). The argument itself is important because it is a recurring question in studies of minority representations, and it could be considered as an ongoing negotiation between gender and ethnic solidarity. But the tendency of the argument could perpetuate a racialized position of Asian American literary texts in general. Aijun Zhu summarizes the tendency in a term, "representational inevitability," which is

a pervasive but seriously flawed reading practice that reduces creative texts to documents on the social, cultural, or political conditions of

their specific racial or national communities, while serving as a discursive control of the West over the Third World, and of a masculinist nation over feminist desires.⁴ (11)

If “representational inevitability” is a reductive way of reading, we could expand the reading range of Asian American literary texts by emphasizing “how we read” them. The emphasis on “how we read” provides multiple readings for one text. Debra Shostak points out that “Maxine Hong Kingston has noted that she relishes the discrepancies that emerge when her brothers and sisters share with her their memories of events from their family’s history” (51). In the novel, discrepancies appear as the heroine’s attempts to tell different versions of certain events she experiences or hears from others. She turns a moral discourse of No Name aunt into a romantic tragedy, and turns a less-than-one-page conversation with her brother into a chapter of an adventurous story of her mother and her aunt, Moon Orchid (163). Shostak says that “Kingston reminds us that ‘history’ includes the variable possibilities of memory, and each of her books is an attempt to weave an understanding of the historical experience of being Chinese-American” (51). Contrary to the current situation in which *The Woman Warrior* still represents Asian American literature and the Asian American female experience, it intends to provide a certain experience of a Chinese American

⁴ I do not agree with her regarding this point of her privileging of feminist discourse because “feminist desires” could be a dominant and hegemonic discourse.

girl/woman and to deconstruct the stereotypical image of Chinese Americans in Chinatown.

The Woman Warrior tries to tell the stories differently from the typical exotic Chinese stories. The novel narrated by the heroine is filled with women figures who experience tragic endings. Representation of these women reflects their repressed status in Chinatown. By telling the stories of the tragic women, the heroine tries to impeach Chinatown of the crimes against them. As those doomed women figures are traditionally concealed and rejected in order to conclude the stories in stereotypical endings, it is also possible to say that the novel itself is the heroine's textual resistance to the reductive reading. The heroine's objection against the fixation of the certain discourses or the images on the racial minorities that try to box her into representations of dutiful Chinese daughters and exotic Chinese women is reflected in her attempts to look for other possibilities against the dominant discourse. The tragic women stories function as a symbol of the heroine's resistance.

Telling different stories has another meaning for the heroine who has a "champion talker" mother (202). For her, to tell the other stories is to produce her own narrative, but to tell the same story means to reproduce her mother's life and stay in Chinatown where her mother is so powerful that it is difficult to claim her own identity. Unlike her family that represses the adulterous aunt who is forced to commit

suicide for her adultery, she “report[s] the crime” (53) and tries to get out of Chinatown, which is dominated by her powerful mother’s stories. However, as she eventually realizes how her mother suffers under sexism and racism in America, it is revealed that the powerful stories actually mask her mother’s victimization. The heroine’s attempt to tell the different stories is not to destroy her mother’s almightiness, but to destroy the illusion of it. And given that Chinatown is an American cultural, political product, telling the different stories of Chinatown could be a counter discourse to the mainstream representation of Chinatown.

ii. Madness and Muteness

So why does “talk[ing]-story” (159) play a significant role in the heroine’s resistance against her mother? Brave Orchid says, “The difference between mad people and sane people [...] is that sane people have variety when they talk-story. Mad people have only one story that they talk over and over” (159). The heroine says, “I thought talking and not talking made the difference between sanity and insanity. Insane people were the ones who couldn’t explain themselves” (186). As Spivak illuminates how subaltern women are robbed of their utterance to themselves in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” a subject is formed through his or her own narrative. In *The Woman Warrior*, unless one accounts for their existence, one will be marked as the

unexplainable, insane people. This is probably why Brave Orchid's "anger boiled over" when her house is mistaken for the house of Crazy Mary's family that has a mentally ill daughter "locked up in the crazyhouse" (169, 186-87). To be considered mad is to be robbed of subjectivity.

Madness or silence could be illuminated in a larger context of Chinatown and its outside. This is not to pathologize Chinatown, but to analyze its cultural and political position in America. The heroine says that most of the Chinese children who behave well in the American school become very active once in the Chinese school (167-68).⁵ She says, "... children who were silent at American school found voice at Chinese school" (168), and describes their voiceless status in American school, their being unable to represent oneself. The heroine also says, "I knew the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl" (166) because "Normal Chinese American women's voices are strong and bossy. We American-Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves American-feminine. Apparently we whispered even more softly than the Americans" (172). This tells not only of a generational gap between the first immigrant generation and the second, but of the second generation's choice of attitudes according to their being inside and outside Chinatown. These episodes tell that silence could be a

⁵ The heroine talks mainly about boys, but also does not say that girls are not active in the Chinese school.

cultural symptom caused by Chinatown's surroundings. Silence is not only culturally, but also politically assigned to Chinese Americans, who were voiceless within the American national policies and cultural misrepresentations. When the grown-up heroine working for a land developer's association refuses to type the association's invitations to the restaurant picketed by CORE and the NAACP, she immediately gets fired (48-49). Given that the women in Chinatown are repressed under the patriarchal codes, their silence is multilayered like the heroine's paintings which she "painted layers of black over houses and flowers and suns" (165).

iii. Exoticization of *The Woman Warrior*

The heroine's narrative of tragic women is important in my argument because it illuminates American readers' and anthologizers' cultural tendencies to privilege and exoticize certain chapters in the novel. Many critics, especially feminists, celebrate the strong female characters such as Brave Orchid and the swordswoman and argue that they affect the heroine in a positive way. This kind of argument, however, implicitly considers Moon Orchid or other madwomen in the novel as negative characters that the heroine should not choose to be, or denies them as unfavorable representations of Asian American women. This type of readings, in attempt to denounce the repressive patriarchal society, creates a conflict within the

women characters. I do not deny that the Brave Orchid's stories of her ghost busting and the swordswoman offer positive models for the heroine, but in these readings, the madwomen, or other tragic women figures such as No Name aunt, are simply considered and rejected as negative figures and serve as universal proof of women's oppression. Esther Mikiyung Ghymn, one of the literary critics who tends to ignore the victimized women characters, says, "Should Anju [the heroine] become strong like Fa Mu Lan and Brave Orchid, or should she become weak like the No Name Aunt and Moon Orchid? At the end Anju chooses the stronger models" (13-14). Although Ghymn analyzes Moon Orchid in a sympathetic way later in her book, this kind of analyses ironically supports an Orientalist view of *The Woman Warrior*, and hides the many nameless madwomen and tragic women confined in Chinatown just like the heroine's family erases No Name aunt from its genealogy.

The privileging of certain figures or chapters reflects the readers' inclination to read them as purely Chinese exotic stories. Kingston, in her objection to "cultural mis-readings" of her novel, says,

How stubbornly Americans hung on to the oriental fantasy can be seen in their picking "The White Tigers" chapter as their favorite. Readers tell me it ought to have been the climax. But I put it at the beginning to show that the childish myth is the past, not the climax we reach for. Also, "The White Tigers" is not a Chinese myth but one transformed by America, a sort of kung fu movie parody. ("Cultural Mis-readings"

97)

American readers' tendency to de-Americanize Kingston's novels (or even herself) is deep-rooted and anthologizers are partially responsible for the tendency. David Leiwei Li points out that the "No Name Woman" chapter is anthologized so many times that it now has a privileged position in *The Woman Warrior*, and because of the novel's popularity, it is read as a general Chinese story without any historical context indicated by Kingston's specific reference of the date 1924 when the Chinese Exclusion Act is expanded. According to Li, "*The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women, The Harper American Literature, Crossing Cultures: Readings for Composition, The Bedford Reader, The Conscious Reader, and The Harvest Reader*" (Li 198), are anthologies that do not have any annotation to explain the historical situation of the "No Name Woman" chapter. The anthologizers of these books help de-historicize Brave Orchid's story and reduce the specific event into an old China's tragic but general story. Li also says, "'No Name Women' is so frequently anthologized and is probably the only Asian American literature many college students will ever be exposed to, and ... unfailingly, my students of American literary survey respond to the chapter as a Chinese story" (199), and criticizes American anthologizers and readers' inclination to make the Chinese American writer's works a pure old Chinese story.

Li also indicates Western critics' inclinations to ignore the historical context of the year 1924 in which No Name aunt's husband sails for America to work there and to consider the chapter as an entirely Chinese story. Criticizing the process of the Western critics' exoticization and de-historicization of the chapter in the name of feminist readings that denounce old China's misogyny and try to save No Name aunt from her Chinese tragedy, Li explains why these quasi-feminist readings are problematic with aptly quoting Rey Chow.

... the attempt to deconstruct the hegemony of patriarchal discourses through feminism is itself foreclosed by the emphasis on "Chinese" as a mark of absolute difference. To my mind, it is when the West's "other women" are prescribed their "own" national and ethnic identity in this way that they are most excluded from having a claim to the reality of their existence. (*Woman and Chinese Modernity* 63)⁶

Privileging, or "nativizing and nationalizing" (Chow 163), No Name aunt or the swordswoman as Chinese general female characters in the name of feminism while ignoring the other women characters could perpetuate Chinese American/immigrant women's victimization of being robbed of their "reality of their existence." No Name aunt is a product of the expanded Chinese Exclusion Act, and the swordswoman is a mix of Fa Mu Lan and Hollywood kung fu movies. The overemphasis on the

⁶ In the argument from which the quotation comes, Chow criticizes a Western critic's construction of Chinese feminism in order to decenter Western feminism.

Chineseness of those characters leads to a disregard of their American contexts, and as a result American influences on them are hidden under their emphasized Chineseness.

iv. Forbidden Stories as the Daughter's Sword

Instead of reading these women figures as general Chinese oppressed women, I'd like to read their stories as a symptom of the heroine's resistance to Chinatown and its American context. No Name aunt, Moon Orchid, female mental defectives in Brave Orchid's village and in Chinatown, a silent girl in the school, and even the heroine herself somehow function as a trigger for the heroine's narrative. For instance, the heroine says, "My aunt haunts me—her ghost drawn to me because now, after fifty years of neglect, I alone devote pages of paper to her" (16). No Name aunt is, with her baby, forced to commit suicide after her villagers' raid upon her family's house for her adultery. After her suicide, her family taboos her and tries to erase her from her family. Telling about No Name aunt generates her own narrative because only she decides to break the silence and tell the hidden story. Those tragic women are often concealed from societies, so by telling about them, she also reports the crime of Chinatown. She once fails to articulate her anger toward misogynistic comments on her and girls in general.

When one of my parents or the emigrant villagers said, “Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds,” I would thrash on the floor and scream so hard I couldn’t talk. I couldn’t stop.

“What’s the matter with her?”

“I don’t know. Bad, I guess. You know how girls are. ‘There’s no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls.’” (46)

Watching the heroine thrashing on the floor, her parent and neighbors do not understand the cause of her anger, and she fails to stop their verbal abuse. But by her disclosure of No Name aunt, she reveals the silenced voice and avenges herself and the other women on Chinatown.

The heroine, however, in her retelling, does not tell Brave Orchid’s story word for word, but modifies it. She not only exposes the victimized woman’s story, but also tries to restore agency to her by considering the other possibility of a romantic love story version for No Name aunt’s tragedy. In the other version, the aunt intentionally commits suicide and threatens the heroine’s father even after her death. The heroine, by retelling the story from the other point of view, provides the possibility of the aunt’s agency which is denied in the original. By telling the other version of the story, she tries to subvert the narrative of Chinatown’s patriarchal codes which try to discipline the heroine’s body through No Name aunt’s story and train it as an obedient female body.

Telling the forbidden women’s stories enables her to detach from both

repressive systems—Chinatown and the mother-daughter relationship. Lee Quinby, a Foucauldian historian and sociologist, analyzes the two systems, using Foucauldian terms: Chinatown as “the deployment of alliance” and the mother-daughter relationship as “deployment of sexuality” (129). Chinatown tells the heroine to comply with its code of kinship based on the exchange of daughters through marriage to maintain kinship among family units, and threatens to banish her if she does not obey it. The mother-daughter relationship tells the heroine her position in Chinatown as an obedient sexualized subject, “a future mother” (129). Since her mother tells the heroine how to behave in order to be accepted well in the community as a woman of her family, her mother is considered as “the nexus” of the two systems (Quinby 129).

Quinby argues that *The Woman Warrior* is a daughter’s narrative of resistance to those repressive systems, and says, “. . . it [*The Woman Warrior*] forges mother-daughter bonds in which the daughter is not required to become yet another “dutiful daughter” in preparation for patriarchally circumscribed motherhood” (130). “[P]atriarchally circumscribed motherhood” or “a future mother” is formed through the heroine’s mother’s taboo story of No Name aunt told as a warning of adultery and its consequence, or other moral stories of dutiful daughters. So, retelling the forbidden stories demonstrates not only her defiance against her mother, but also her resistance against Chinatown’s patriarchal system that reproduces “the father’s lineage” through

the maternal body (129).⁷ When she says, "... there is more to this silence: they want me to participate in her [No Name aunt's] punishment" (16), the heroine realizes her mother's complicity in Chinatown's repressive patriarchal systems against the women. By being a dutiful daughter, the heroine might be complicit with her family and Chinatown's patriarchal laws to keep victimizing women, and she could be one of them.

v. Reproduction of Silence

The mother-daughter relationship in Kingston's novel is represented as a nexus of two systems, of alliance and sexuality, which capture her in the patriarchal system. The heroine's mother is an invincible existence in Chinatown, and for the heroine who tries to claim her own identity through narrative, a champion story-teller. Brave Orchid is also identified with Chinatown which oppresses the heroine's femininity. The heroine is not sure who, the parents or the neighbors, said a misogynistic phrase, "Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds" (46). Her confusion about who said the phrase shows her mother is a member of women who comply with

⁷ I'd like to note that the resistance starts with Brave Orchid, who could have told No Name aunt's story as an anonymous moral story, or just simply remained silent about it, but tells the story anyway disobeying her husband's prohibition on telling it. By telling the tragedy as an oral matrilineal story, Brave Orchid complies with the patriarchal law and violates it at the same time.

Chinatown's misogynistic culture. But as the heroine listens to her mother's stories, she realizes that her mother is another victim. Brave Orchid proudly talks about her Chinese days of working as a doctor, and says, "You have no idea how much I have fallen coming to America" (77). As a professional woman, she enjoys rights that no other usual women have, such as wearing expensive clothes, having a sedan car to send her to the village or using her maiden name (76-77). The heroine tells how much she has fallen from the doctor's status after coming to America.

"I didn't need muscles in China. I was small in China." She [the heroine's mother] was. The silk dresses she gave me are tiny. You would not think the same person wore them. This mother can carry a hundred pounds of Texas rice up-and down stairs. She could work at the laundry from 6:30 a.m. until midnight, shifting a baby from an ironing table to a shelf between packages, to display window, where the ghosts tapped on the glass. (104)

Although the heroine says that her mother "can" do these laborious jobs, it is obvious that she had to do them for a living. An inexhaustible, powerful image the heroine has of her mother is a result of menial jobs, which do not require any of her professional skills. Therefore, the silk dresses are a symbol of the heroine's mother's accomplishment in China and also an evidence of the humiliation she has endured in America.

The heroine's recognition of her mother as a victim provides the heroine a

possibility that she also could be victimized if she repeats her mother's story of connivance at Chinatown's crime and social injustice to her. These signs of female victimization are told in her mother's stories. The mother-daughter relationship is represented as a narrative system that reproduces the same repressive discourse against Chinese American women who are confined in Chinatown and exploited under the racial stratification of jobs. The reproduction of the same discourse means that the heroine has to comply with the patriarchal codes of Chinatown that try to erase the adulterous aunt and possibly herself from the family. The heroine is often afraid of being sold by the parents for not being a good daughter. Motherhood is "patriarchally circumscribed" as Quinby says, and could not be a model that the heroine wants to identify with in order to gain her separate identity from her mother.

The simple celebration of Asian mother-daughter relationships as an empowering female bond often overlooks this repressive side of the relationships, which require a daughter to be obedient to the status quo. This disempowering mother-daughter relationship is well depicted in Moon Orchid's ending in "a California state mental asylum" (159). Moon Orchid is rejected by her bigamous husband, fails to translate her Chinese reality into an American one, and eventually goes "mad" (159). After she is hospitalized, the narrator says,

Brave Orchid visited her sister twice. Moon Orchid was thinner each time, shrunken to bone. But, surprisingly, she was happy and had made up a new story. She pranced like a child. “Oh, Sister, I am so happy here. No one ever leaves. Isn’t that wonderful? We are all women here. Come. I want you to meet my daughters.” She introduced Brave Orchid to each inmate in the ward – her daughters. She was especially proud of the pregnant ones. “My dear pregnant daughters.” She touched the women on the head, straightened collars, tucked blankets. “How are you today, dear daughter?” “And, you know,” she said to Brave Orchid, “we understand one another here. We speak the same language, the very same. They understand me, and I understand them.” Sure enough, the women smiled back at her and reached out to touch her as she went by. She had a new story, and yet she slipped entirely away, not waking up one morning. (160)

In the asylum, all the other female patients speak in the same language. Speaking the same language, whether it is English or Chinese, is a disregard and prohibition of difference, which leads to reproduction of the same discourse, the discourse of silence oppressing other possibilities. This is in opposition to the heroine’s resolution to tell the different stories and to construct her own narrative to report the hidden crimes. The asylum symbolizes Chinatown, in which the women are expected to reproduce the same discourse to obey its patriarchal codes. In the asylum, which seems like an ideal of separatist feminism, the women construct intimate quasi-mother-daughter relationships among themselves. They create a matriarchal space, in which pregnancy is what they are proud of.

Privileging a female biological characteristic in terms of mother-daughter

relationship is not liberating for women even though it seems empowering. An emphasis on or idealization of female reproductive ability reduces women and motherhood as reproductive machines and social institutions, which are a cornerstone of many patriarchal societies.⁸ Moon Orchid's special favor of the pregnant women is a perilous sign of idealization of biological femininity, and her fake mother-daughter relationship shows the repressive side of that female bonding. As long as it is a "patriarchally circumscribed motherhood," the heroine could not depend on it in order to gain her own narrative. Moon Orchid's peace and happiness are based on these oppressions of women. The same structure, that positive factors hides negative ones, is also seen in critics' privileging of Brave Orchid's certain Chinese stories. However powerful Brave Orchid's stories are, they actually mask her powerlessness as a Chinese woman, and the heroine could not rely on the system, or the motherhood, if she chooses not to be a madwoman who only repeats the same story and never explain herself.

However, given that the novel spares so many pages for the tragic women, the heroine's choice, not to be considered as one of them, as a madwoman, does not mean her total rejection of them as negative characters as in Ghym's argument. In the

⁸ Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* tries to argue about female body beyond the patriarchal frame that reduces it as a reproductive and thus nursery machine although she often romanticize mother-daughter relationships' biological facts.

following section, I will analyze how the heroine copes with the tragic women in her process of gaining her own narrative.

vi. “No Higher Listener”: Differentiation from the Mother

The heroine says, “I thought every house had to have its crazy woman or crazy girl, every village its idiot. Who would be It at our house? Probably me” (189) and describes her unfeminine deeds and abnormality of talking to unreal people inside her head (189-90). She, however, clearly says, “I did not want to be our crazy one” (190), and that “I thought talking and not talking made the difference between sanity and insanity” (186). For the heroine who has an invincible storytelling mother, talk-story is a way out, but if you repeat the same story, you would be considered mad. Telling stories does not save her from insanity, or from being unable to explain herself as she demonstrates when she repeats screaming “I’m not a bad girl” and fails to communicate her anger to others (46). She also tries to tell “a list of two hundred things that I had to tell my mother” (197) because “If only I could let my mother know the list, she—and the world—would become more like me, and I would never be alone again” (198). She unconsciously hesitates to differentiate herself from her mother and tries to ignore the difference between them. In her attempt to communicate with the external world, to be understood and to differentiate herself

from others, she almost slips into a pre-discursive world without difference, in which the boundary between the heroine and the world does not exist, so that the world naturally understands her. Just telling stories will not liberate her, and in fact, it sacrifices recognition of difference for mother-daughter symbiosis like the one in Moon Orchid's asylum. She cannot repeat the same stories, but she has to tell different stories just like she imagines the other possibility for No Name aunt.

The heroine, instead of telling the two hundred secrets, chooses to tell the tragic women's stories because they are a symbol of discrimination against her that makes her so angry that she can scream only "I'm not a bad girl" (46). The heroine does not simply tell her mother's stories word for word, but modifies them. Making another story from her mother's story is the heroine's spiritual separation from her mother. Ghym says that the heroine's development is accomplished through negation of the negative, weak characters and identification with positive, stronger characters. I argue that, for the heroine, the very negative women are a key to establishing her identity that defies Chinatown's patriarchal codes. In Chinatown where getting straight A's means nothing for a girl who should save her village instead, telling about those women who do not comply with the patriarchal law is a defiant act that differentiates the heroine from other "patriarchally circumscribed" women.

By telling her own stories, she also articulates her own desires that also could

separate her from her mother. When she is sick of “a mentally retarded boy” of the rich family (194), to whom she thinks her mother would marry her, the heroine screams to her, bursting out “the hardest ten or twelve things” (201-02) on the list. Things that she feels are difficult to tell are another form of forbidden stories, which would make the heroine defiant of Chinatown femininity. She tells her mother that she is “smart” enough to leave Chinatown, and that she will no longer care about her great-great-grandfather’s cause of death, and accuses the mother of telling lies (201-02). The heroine, by telling the facts and hopes—a kind of story, renounces the choices to be a dutiful daughter who will save her village and who respects her ancestors and parents.

After the heroine reveals the most difficult things to confide, however, Brave Orchid says, “We [Chinese] like to say the opposite” (203) and that she does not literally mean everything she says. Then the heroine says, “It seemed to hurt her to tell me that—another guilt for my list to tell my mother, I thought. And suddenly I got very confused and lonely because I was at that moment telling her my list, and in the telling, it grew. No higher listener. No listener but myself” (203-04). This is a very disturbing moment where she feels free and guilty at the same time. Because there is no “higher listener,” she no longer has to feel judged by anyone, especially her mother, but still she feels guilty about dismissing her mother from the position of the highest

listener. As she finishes the confession, however, she realizes that her secret list grows endlessly and that it is impossible to be totally accepted by her mother by telling everything. Therefore she gets “confused and lonely” because even though she tells everything, her mother never knows “true things” about her.

The heroine’s mother never understands the heroine perfectly and always remains as an other who may not understand her perfectly. Her mother remains as other because she is not “mad” like Moon Orchid who understands everything about others. The heroine is not mad, too because she does not understand everything about China or Chinese. There are a variety of meanings for one Chinese word, and the heroine could not decide the true meaning of the word. Her mother calls the heroine “Ho Chi Kuei” when she says that she would leave Chinatown, and she does not know if the word means good or bad even after looking it up in a dictionary (204-05). She no longer has to explain all the mysteries of Chinatown because mysteries and ambiguity is what makes her sane, what makes people “have variety when they talk-story” (159). Recognition of difference from the mother could be disturbing and painful because it leads the child to leave peaceful symbiosis with the mother, an imagined state or space where one could perfectly understand the other and thus difference does not exist. But for the heroine, to stay with her mother in Chinatown is also to endure discrimination against her. For the heroine to stay in Chinatown, there

are two ways: to be treated as the “crazy” or to tell the same story that other “patriarchally circumscribed” women tell, and neither are her choice.

When she tells of her desire to get out of Chinatown, the heroine realizes that the telling of her desire is not for her mother to understand her, the highest listener, but for herself to recognize her own desire. Until this scene, it is unclear if she really wants to leave Chinatown because even though one could see that the heroine is sick of its misogynistic culture, she does not clearly express her desire to leave. As she tries to tell the two hundred secrets, she thinks that if the world understands her, she also would be able to understand Chinatown mysteries and their way of thinking so that she would no longer be angry over discrimination against her. However, as she differentiates herself from her mother, she realizes that she would not, could not and does not have to understand the Chinese way of treating her as a “bad girl” because, like “Ho Chi Kuei,” in Chinese a word has many meanings. This ambiguity is not a rejection of Chinatown as the cultural other because the cultural other is often based on a negation of an unfavorable side of the subject. She does not deny their way of thinking, but she just does not understand it.

She no longer has to care if Brave Orchid would allow her to be who she wants to be, and she frees herself from her mother’s dominion. However, she does not totally reject her mother. In the end of the chapter titled “Shaman,” there is a long

conversation between Brave Orchid and the heroine who returns home after an interval of one year. The heroine wants to sleep, but Brave Orchid keeps talking, and they talk at cross purposes for pages. Brave Orchid rejects all the heroine's logical, scientific arguments with various objections. For instance, Brave Orchid says, "Human beings don't work like this in China ... I would still be young if we lived in China," and the heroine says, "Time is the same from place to place ... There is only the eternal present and biology," then her mother says, "I can't stop working. When I stop working, I hurt" (105-06). The heroine agrees with her mother's opinions, but then her mother directs conversation another way. They talk, but never find a common ground.

This is another moment the heroine realizes irrevocable difference between her and her mother after she leaves home. However, in the end of the conversation, her mother calls her "Little Dog" and allows her to stay away from Chinatown after the heroine tells that she gets sick when coming home and that she finds her comfortable place outside Chinatown.

She [Brave Orchid] yawned, "It's better, then, for you to stay away. The weather in California must not agree with you. You can come for visits." She got up and turned off the light. "Of course, you must go, Little Dog."

A weight lifted from me. The quilts must be filling with air. The world is somehow lighter. She has not called me that endearment for

years—a name to fool the gods. I am really a Dragon, as she is a Dragon, both of us born in dragon years. I am practically a first daughter of a first daughter. (108-09)

Brave Orchid still cares for her daughter regardless of the differences they have. As the heroine realizes this, a pressure that the world casts on her disappears. As I pointed out above, the world for the heroine is often identified with her mother (she tells a lot about the world to the heroine and she means the world to her). When her mother comes in a room where the heroine pretends to sleep, she feels like she is examined by her mother; “I felt her sight warm each of my bony elbows, and I flopped about in my fake sleep to hide them from her criticism” (100). The heroine leaves Chinatown as she declares, but is still afraid if she is no longer loved by her mother. By being called “Little Dog,” however, she recognizes her mother’s affection for her again.

The quotation, in which Brave Orchid allows the heroine to stay away from Chinatown, is important because it also shows that the heroine begins to accept her Chinese heritage. When she feels no pressure of “[t]he quilts,” which are actually the “homemade Chinese kind” (99) and symbolize filial duty as Chinese tradition, she implies that she does not feel responsible anymore as a Chinese American daughter who is supposed to stay with her mother. She also understands the Chinese endearment as her mother’s kindness to protect her from the gods. In addition, she

accepts the idea of the Chinese zodiac and recognizes the importance of being born in a dragon year like her mother. She even shares her identity with her mother from whom she longs to separate. In the following section, I will analyze how the heroine deals with her Chinese heritage when she faces her Chinese American identity outside Chinatown.

vii. Chinatown Revisited

The heroine recognizes her desire and leaves Chinatown only to find racism and yet more sexism against her in the outside world. The outside of Chinatown is not what she imagines it to be. She can think logically and is not afraid of ghosts in dark corners, but still experiences humiliating situations. She says, "... all the time I was having to turn myself American feminine, or no dates" (47), and she can only resist her racist boss in her "bad, small person's voice that makes no impact" (48) or whispering in her "unreliable" voice (49) only to be fired immediately. She is frustrated by her powerlessness, comparing herself with Fa Mu Lan. She says, "From the fairy tales, I've learned exactly who the enemy are. I easily recognize them" (48). She knows the enemy and is ready to resist the oppressions that deny her, but is not yet confident of herself as an Asian American woman. She succeeds in gaining her separate identity of a daughter from the mother's dominion, but also escapes her

Asian American identity at the same time. In other words, she constructs another conflict between her and other Chinese American women who comply with Chinatown codes.

By accusing Chinatown, the heroine detaches herself from people inside Chinatown. She has to realize how her Chinatown experience functions in herself. She could no longer tell the childish fantasy of Fa Mu Lan to satisfy herself because she now realizes that “When urban renewal tore down my parents’ laundry and paved over our slum for a parking lot, I only made up gun and knife fantasies and did nothing useful” (48). She has to revisit, reconfigure and reconcile with her Chinatown experience that forms her identity. I take the last story of the novel, the heroine’s collaborative work with her mother, as the heroine’s attempt to reconcile with her Chinatown memories. In the story, there is another Chinese historical figure, Ts’ai Yen, a poetess. If the furious woman warrior, Fa Mu Lan, symbolizes the anger that the young heroine feels, Ts’ai Yen symbolizes reconciliation with the anger. Although Ts’ai Yen fights “desultorily” (208), she never revenges herself on those who hold her hostage. In the end, she is ransomed and brings songs of the capturers to her land. The heroine says, “When I visit the family now, I wrap my American successes around me like a private shawl” (52), and it might seem like that she reproduces the plot of the woman warrior, who returns in triumph to her village. But here in the end of the novel,

the heroine tries to tell a different story based on her mother's story while, in the woman warrior's story, the swordswoman just follows the traditional plot of romantic love ideology; a happy heterosexual couple with a boy child.

The story of the mother and the daughter in the end begins as follows. "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). She tells a story of Ts'ai Yen after her mother's story about her grandmother who loves theatre very much. A literary critic, Amy Ling summarizes why this final collaborative story is significant.

Throughout *The Woman Warrior* we find the dialogue between anger/bitterness and love/tenderness as the daughter seeks self-definition apart from the mother. Since the struggle is defined as one of words and voice between one who is a powerful talker with many stories and one who has yet to find her voice, so the resolution of this struggle, and of the book, is a verbal and narrative one in that the final story of Ts'ai Yen is a collaborative effort between mother and daughter ... It is, however, impossible to tell in this story where the beginning ends and the ending begins ... Thus, the daughter's journey for her own voice is a struggle in which the "mother-tongue" must be both refused and embraced, both preserved and modified, both acknowledged and gone beyond. (178)

The heroine dares to follow, combine, and collaborate with the champion story teller.

What is significant in her achievement is that, by following her mother's story, as

Ling says, she both refuses and embraces it. How does she achieve such

accomplishment? In the end she tells about a sequel of Ts'ai Yen who is kidnapped by

another tribe,

After twelve years among the Southern Hsiung-nu, Ts'ai Yen was ransomed and married to Tung Ssu ... She brought her songs back from the savage lands, and one of the three that has been passed down to us is "Eighteen Stanza for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," a song that Chinese sing to their own instruments. It translated well. (209)

The translation of the song is not perfect, but just "well." Through her interpretation of Ts'ai Yen's story, the heroine recognizes the limit of translation in her own interpretation of Chinese heritage from her mother. A culture could spread to another culture, and descends to the next generation, but it only translates "well" and will never be the same. It becomes something different. But as she realizes before she leaves Chinatown, such difference in the stories enables her to differentiate from her mother and saves her from insanity, from being unable to explain herself, to find her own voice.

She is a Chinese American, who is often thought to be a perfect translator of Chinese and English, but is not. After she learns not to struggle with the Chinese mysteries, she stops "checking 'bilingual' on job applications" (205) because she no longer has to consider herself as a Chinese American who understands everything about China and America. She knows what is right for her because of recurring "throat pain," a symptom of being repressed (205). She no longer believes everything

her mother says because she now knows that her mother habitually tells a lie out of her love for the heroine and out of her pride as a once-independent woman. The heroine as a swordswoman says during the training, "I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes" (29). After the unreasonable experience outside Chinatown, this phrase has another meaning. She now could embrace unbelievable Chinese stories as part of her Chinatown experience. Li says "T'sai Yen's story makes an Other as one of us" (194-95). She accepts the unexplainable, a sign of madness, in herself because she finds that "paradoxes" or the unexplainable are a sign of being sane.

Probably the heroine revisits Chinatown when she hears her mother's story, but listening to the story as a daughter out of the mother's dominance, she also revisits and reconsiders Chinatown as a locus of her experience that forms her Chinese American woman identity. Before she leaves Chinatown, she only takes it as an illogical space filled with ghosts and her mother's mysterious Chinese stories. But after she realizes what is covered behind those mystic images, she can see Chinatown from another point of view, and that is a moment when Other becomes other. When she realizes that cultural translation could not be done perfectly, she accepts her Chinatown mysterious experience as it is in herself. She stops seeing Chinatown as a cultural "Other," and tries to embrace it as part of her experience by following her

mother's story. By telling the forbidden stories, the heroine separates from her mother and exposes the mystic mask of Chinatown. This leads her to leave Chinatown, but she eventually reconciles with her Chinese American identity through her story based on the matrilineal story of her mother and grandmother.

Chapter 3: *Bone*i. *Bone*: Telling from Another Point of View

Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* is a story of a Chinese immigrants' daughter, Leila. After her long search for an answer to her half-sister Ona's suicide, she finally decides to leave San Francisco Chinatown. Struggling between her desire to escape Chinatown and her filial duty to stay with her mother Mah, Leila tries to demystify the dismal image of Chinatown and find a solution to the conflict. With discord between Mah; and her stepfather, Leon; her rebel half-sister Nina; and her obedient half-sister, Ona, her family relationship becomes problematic. Even her fiancé, Mason, who helps her in many ways, does not solve the problem. Despite its misogynistic culture, Leila does not completely hate Chinatown. For example, she likes an "old-style" café in Chinatown that is used for "the Greyhound tour crowds" (8). On the other hand, she wants to "forget. The Blame. The pressing fear" (51) once she is outside Chinatown and free from Mah and Leon. Chinatown is represented as a sad, still comfortable cage from which she hesitates to leave.

Leila's problem is often caused by her being trapped in and torn between the two sides. She is often in dilemmas as to whether she should choose one over the other, such as being an Asian American woman, being a translator for her Chinese

immigrant parents and English speaking Americans (15), working as “the bridge between classroom teacher and the parents” (14), being in conflict between her personal desire outside Chinatown and her filial duty inside it and, “being pulled back and forth between Mah and Mason” (47). She especially struggles with Mah, a typical hard-working Chinese immigrant and an officious Chinese mother. Because of the toil-filled life Mah has led for the family, Leila has a guilty conscience about leaving Chinatown, which means abandoning Mah with irritable Leon. Leon is an illegal immigrant working on the sea most of the time while wanting to secure a job on the land. Because of his hardship to find a job and being unrecognized as a citizen, he feels betrayed by America. Leila somehow gets along with Leon, and Mah is the last for Leila to tell about her marriage with Mason. This shows Leila’s strained relationship with Mah.

Leila could not leave Chinatown unless she is secure about Mah’s life with Leon. Her hesitation to leave Mah results from the past tragic events such as Mah’s affair, Ona’s suicide and a following collapse of the family and Leon’s moving out, and her second half-sister Nina’s leaving for New York. Chinatown is also filled with other tragic memories such as a failure of the family business and the unhappy marriage of Mah and Leon. These misfortunes often stem from the family’s poverty, which is clearly a result of racial discrimination in the American job market. The

brunt of Leon's anger is borne by Ona's personal life, and then the most tragic incident happens. Leila's hesitation to leave Chinatown is her reluctance to leave Mah alone in the space filled with the horrible memories. So it is possible to say that Leila's hesitation to leave Chinatown could be resolved only when she recognizes Mah's own desire to stay in Chinatown with Leon.

However, it is not so easy as Leila has seen Mah toiling around the clock so many years. Many Chinese immigrant parents are supposed to want their children to lead a better life and their self-sacrificing image is a widespread representation of Chinese immigrant mothers. This is because such an image meets the American myth of Asian Americans as model minorities who work hard despite the racial discrimination and eventually achieve success. This American-filtered image of Chinese immigrants makes it more difficult for Leila to recognize Mah's own desire.

Unlike the heroine of *The Woman Warrior* who has to recognize her mother as a victim to disentangle her mother from the mysterious Chinatown, Leila has to recognize Mah's happiness in order to disentangle her from the dismal Chinatown. To unfix Mah from Chinatown is also to demystify Chinatown, to see it from another point of view. One way for Leila to demystify the doomed image of Chinatown is to investigate her memory with Mah. Deconstruction of Chinatown is symbolized in the ending by Leila's neologism, "backdaire" (191), a Chinese-accented "back there,"

which rejects the dichotomies and alternatives that force her to choose one over the other. The ending avoids a definite answer and it would sound indeterminable and frustrating. I'd like to consider the equivocal, open ending as Leila's tactic to negotiate with her reality which is always under pressure of fixation of certain images on her body according to the binaries, such as mother/father or Asian/American, which perpetuates unfair (not unequal) relationship between them. In the following section, I will show the novel's critical description of Chinatown and analyze the sisters' representations to show Leila's attempt to describe Chinatown stories different from the mainstream representations of them.

ii. "Inside Story": Chinatown and the Sisters' Choices

When Leila feels that her privacy is threatened by the Chinatown tourists, she juxtaposes her "inside story" with the decorative surface of Chinatown, and implies that there are actual people's reality that the tourists never know behind the theatrical surface of Chinatown. Right after Leila tells about Ona's suicide to her parents, in the car heading to their Chinatown home, she says,

From the low seats of the Camaro, I looked out at the streets and saw the spidery writing on the store signs, the dressed-up street lamps with their pagoda tops, the oddly matched colors: red with green, green with aqua blue, yellow with pink.

Looking out, I thought, So this is what Chinatown looks like from inside those dark Greyhound buses; this slow view, these strange color combinations, these narrow streets, this is what tourists come to see. I felt a small lightening up inside, because I knew, no matter what people saw, no matter how close they looked, our inside story is something entirely different. I knew the dangers of closing up, but I didn't care. Right then, I didn't want people looking at us. I wanted to slide down deeper into myself; I wanted to hide from everything. I dreaded telling Mah and Leon, and now it was done. I dreaded telling Nina, but that too would soon be over with, and then what? What would we do after telling? We'd bury Ona; we'd mourn Ona. And then what? (141-42)

Leila tries to represent Chinatown differently than its mainstream representations.

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

Leila also depicts Chinatown as a traditional, old space that even she as a Chinese American does not understand. The first thing a reader learns about the place is that it is disciplined with traditional Chinese standards such as prioritizing sons

over daughters. It is also depicted differently from a stereotyped space filled with dragons or Chinese peony flowers. The first place a reader visits is a messy room of an “old-man hotel” (2) filled with old, useless junk such as “Stacks of takeout containers, a pile of aluminum tins. Plastic bags filled with packs of ketchup and sugar. White cans with red letters, government-issue vegetables: sliced beets, waxy green beans squash ... towers of Styrofoam cups, stacks of restaurant napkins, and assorted fast-food straws” (3). It is a place disorderly and still dominated by traditional beliefs, and the narrator is obviously sick of it. The “inside story” is also told through representations of Leila’s two half-sisters, which reveals their importance in her decision to leave Chinatown.

Leila’s two half-sisters, Ona and Nina, symbolize her filial duty and her personal desire, but she could not follow either sister’s path. If she follows Ona who suffers a conflict between her boyfriend and her parents, she might end up committing suicide like Ona because she also sees a man, Mason. Nor can she follow Nina who just leaves Chinatown because Leila could not leave Mah alone in Chinatown. She has to narrate herself differently from Ona and Nina.

Ona is characterized by her suicide and is depicted as a suffering daughter in conflict between her Chinese-Peruvian boyfriend, Osvaldo and her father Leon. It is possible to say that Ona’s suicide symbolizes a deadlock of heterosexual relationships

as a way of escaping Chinatown. This indicates that for Asian American women figures, traditional narrative endings of marriage or relationships with males could not be a drastic and radical way to escape Chinatown. Especially for Asian American children who feel an obligation to their parents for their hard-work, leaving Chinatown could be a difficult task. When they are rather obedient and attached to their parents like Ona who counts days until Leon comes home, the task is even more difficult.

Ona's suicide could be read as a warning to Leila who is in relationship with Mason, who wants to live with her outside of Chinatown. The expected logic of fairytales, a plot that a prince takes away the heroine from the plight, does not work in the novel. Mason, a Chinese American, who avoids "Chinesey" things and is affable and likable to Mah and Leon, is too good to be true, and that is why Leila has to be careful not to totally depend on him for her own liberation. She cannot adhere to romantic love ideology without facing her guilty sense of ignoring her filial duty. Leila, who is trapped between her parents and Mason, has to recognize her own reasons to leave Chinatown in order to escape the dilemma. If she makes Mason her main motive to leave her parents, her desire to leave Chinatown will be left unsolved. She wants to leave Chinatown, but from Ona's death, she learns that she could not use Mason for her excuse to leave Chinatown. She has to recognize her own desire to

leave Chinatown, but how she leaves is also a problem, which is symbolized in Nina who actually leaves for New York.

Nina, who has left Chinatown, works as a tour guide and lives in New York, and symbolizes physical freedom from Chinatown. She has an abortion, which makes the parents disown her and it characterizes her as a rebel daughter in contrast to the obedient one, Ona. The abortion could be read as another physical freedom from Chinatown standards. A literary critic, Phillipa Kafka, in her argument of Leila as a “syncretized” character, depicts Ona and Nina as the old and the new, and assigns negative characters to them: Ona fails to survive the conflict and Nina flees from her filial duty irresponsibly, and Kafka criticizes Nina’s choice to leave Chinatown.

She [Ng] answers the question for all her characters as to whether they need to continue to collaborate willingly or not, consciously or not, with patriarchy; whether they should kill themselves like Ona, or cut themselves off from it entirely like Nina (whose endless affairs and abortions symbolize Myenne Ng’s negative response to this solution).
(76)

Kafka also says, “The struggle that she seems unaware of, the feminist struggle, has also made it possible for Nina to have her abortion, to tell about it and live, and continue living without being ‘a tragedy queen’” (54). According to Kafka, Nina is a “postfeminist” (59) who is ungrateful to longtime feminists’ struggle. Given Nina is an impetus to make Leila decide to marry Mason in New York, however, it is difficult

to reject Nina as a total negative, ungrateful woman of postfeminism generation. I'd like to consider Nina's case as a drastic way to survive and escape Chinatown. Her abortion also could be read as a resistance to the traditional representations of tragic, victimized Asian women who commit suicide with her baby or have an abortion in *The Woman Warrior* or *The Joy Luck Club*. She has an abortion and still leads a life she wants.

Nina's running away from Chinatown seems irresponsible especially to Leila who makes every effort to support the collapsing family. Leila blames and envies Nina for her escape, but Nina is not always a negative character. She is the only sister with whom Leila could share the memory of Ona as survivors in Chinatown. After Ona's suicide, Leila and Nina visit Ona's workplace, a club where she worked as a hostess. Nina says, "Ona could keep a secret better than anybody," and Leila answers, "We're all pretty good at it" (108-9). Keeping secrets is a painful skill learned in the taboo-filled Chinatown family constructed through the Chinese Exclusion Act that could deport Chinese immigrants. Leila can confide only in Nina to share the painful memories of the family as American-born children.

Nina's drastic uprooting way of leaving Chinatown, however, does not work for Leila, who feels guilty for leaving Mah in it. Neither can she choose the notional middle way between the two sisters. If Ona's suicide is an ultimate consequence of

being an obedient daughter complying with the Chinatown patriarchal codes, Nina's abortion could be the one of disobedience. But unlike Ona, Nina survives and this asymmetry makes it difficult to place Leila in the middle way, or Leila as a syncretized character if following Kafka's argument.

Instead of the suicide and the runaway, or just staying in Chinatown, Leila deconstructs the discourse of the dismal Chinatown that spiritually binds her to Mah with the daughter's guilty conscience. She revisits her memory of Chinatown and tries to find other sides of Chinatown and other faces of Mah which are not easily reduced to the unhappy images of Chinatown. Her departure from Chinatown means not only her physical removal, but also deconstruction of its discourse. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong says that Asian Americans are "ghettoized spiritually and/or physically" in Chinatown (*Reading Asian American Literature* 44), and it means that Chinese American figures' departure from Chinatown has a two-fold meaning; spiritual and physical. Leila's leave from Chinatown also could be a physical and spiritual solution of Chinatown as a space and a discourse.

iii. Imagined Maternal

Because Mah is an Asian American, it is unavoidable in an argument of mother-daughter relationships to ask how race would function for her representation.

If physical “Asian” features signify certain meanings engraved in her body, what do they mean? What is a cultural mask Mah wears?⁹ Yoonmee Chang using queer theory gives us an insightful view of how race functions in *Bone*. She sets a parameter of race in Lee Edelman’s idea of reproductive futurism that is based on heterosexuality and is embodied as the Child, abstract, imaginary children for which every political movement fights. Analyzing why Leon insists that Ona should stop seeing Osvaldo, a son of a Chinese-Peruvian interracial marriage, Chang argues that in Chinatown “the political future is calibrated by a “racial Child” ... the fantastical figure of racial, cultural, and ethical purity ... that promises cultural-ethical purity” (103). Her argument here focuses on Leon’s self-justification for accusing Ona’s relationship with a “mongrel,” but a focus could be shifted onto Mah, who actually reproduces “racially pure children.” If a “racial Child” is a fantastical figure, how is the mother of a “racial Child” defined on an epistemological level?

Mah is depicted as a typical Chinese immigrant mother who works hard and sacrifices herself so that their children could have a better life. A self-sacrificing mother who has racially pure children seems politically correct for both the majority

⁹ I use the metaphor of mask as representation forced on Chinese immigrant mothers, but similar to an argument of Judith Butler’s idea of gender as performance, this does not mean that they can change their mask if one does not like it. Cultural meanings written on their body are internalized and externalized, and as a result, mask eventually becomes their flesh, inseparable part of their identity.

and the minority because her representation meets an image of Asian Americans as a model minority and codes of racial desire for political solidarity. The majority wants mothers who reproduce racially pure children to ghettoize Asian Americans, and they also need naturalized images of passive and obedient minorities so that they could justify themselves in abusing minorities and attributing their political powerlessness to their ethnic characteristics. The minority, on the other hand, also needs racially pure children for its solidarity.

However, if such an image of the ethnic mother is firmly linked to the imagined racially pure child, racial Child, it is probably idealized and thus imagined. In addition, it was difficult for many Chinese American males then to have a nuclear family in Chinatown because of the unbalanced gender ratio (Mah has two choices for her husband; Tommy Hom or Leon), so wives or future mothers were scarce and thus could have a privileged meaning, and become idealized. Perhaps such an imagined Chinese mother, following Chang, could be called “racial Mother.”

The popular representations of Chinese immigrant mothers are doubly constructed by the majority and the Chinese immigrant societies, and thus it is not an easy task for Leila to recognize Mah’s desire beyond the culturally distorted image. Indeed, she almost falls into the logic of pre-discursive maternal space, an imagined space in which mother-child conflicts disappears. At the end of the novel, where she

finally decides to leave Chinatown to live with Mason, Leila remembers a welcome home dinner for Leon.

I listened to us eating—Mah and Leon, Mason and me—the soft suck of rice in our mouths, the click of the chopsticks against bowls. These sounds were comfortable, and for a moment, I was tempted to fall back into the easiness of being Mah’s daughter, of letting her be my whole life. (190)

Leila does not listen to specific spoken words, but only the sounds of their eating, and somehow the comfortable sounds are directly associated with Mah. Eating is a very intimate action because it is based on trust that food is not harmful or poisoned by a cook. Eating Mah’s food implies there is an intimate relationship between Mah and Leila. Especially the sentence, “soft suck ... in our mouths,” implies the mother’s nursing. Falling back into “the easiness of being Mah’s daughter,” which is represented only by sounds, could be construed as being back in the womb where she can let Mah be her whole life and obscures dividing lines of the mother and the daughter. In a state like pre-Oedipal phase, there supposes to be no language that classifies the subject and the object. If one is not formed as a subject, there would be no conflict, and its easiness would be tempting especially for Leila who struggles for autonomy in the collapsing family. Despite Chinatown being not always depicted as a pleasant space, in this scene it is represented as an idealized, very tempting maternal

space.

Images of food in Asian American parent-child relationships have a more ominous connotation than a tempting mother-daughter symbiosis. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong proposes a shocking idea of a cannibalistic image of filial sacrifice for the parents in Asian American literature. Wong argues that the immigrants' children are symbolized as food for their parents in a food -and eating motif:

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

As an example, Wong analyzes a scene of *Bone* in which Mah sucks on bones so that the daughters could eat the rest of the meaty parts (32). The mother's self-sacrifice implicitly demands the same from the children in return. Despite their attempt to stop them from such self-denying actions, Leila and Nina realize that they cannot help acting like their mother when they stingily eat food at a modern restaurant outside New York Chinatown. Parents' self-sacrifice for the children's better future ironically binds them with a sense of guilt. In the dinner scene, "quasi-cannibalism," in Wong's term, reappears as Leila's willingness to give herself to Mah. It is possible to say that the image of the mother demanding children's sacrifice is another image of racial

Mother because it is also based on its cultural representation with historical weight.

What is problematic here is that the representation of the daughter who is eager to be a passive subject and stay in Chinatown could perpetuate the representation of Asian American women ghettoized in Chinatown as voluntary victims. Such representation would help hide the economic exploitation in the name of ethnic nature and justify ghettoization of Asian Americans. The contradictory term “voluntary victims” indicates that the victimization of Asian American women is partially attributed to their own acceptance of their victimized representations as cultural norms inherited from their native countries. It is possible to say that Ng’s text tries to say “no” to such representations by placing Leila’s departure from Chinatown at the end.

The identification of Chinatown as the maternal space and imagining the maternal demanding for the filial sacrifice are based on the cultural images and children’s imagination based on their guilty sense to leave their self-sacrificing mothers. What prevents Leila from seeing Mah beyond the culturally distorted image is her imagined identification with Mah who is in accord with the image of racial Mother. Leila thinks that she knows her mother very well as her daughter, but she only sees Mah through the filter of the racial Mother image. Mah is firmly associated with Chinatown because her biological father has been out of Chinatown, in Australia,

and Leon is at sea for most of the time. Her view of Chinatown as a maternal space is embodied in Leon talking to Mah. He says, “You don’t know. You’re inside Chinatown; it’s safe. You don’t know. Outside, it’s different” (178). His remarks about Chinatown are interesting because even to him, Chinatown is associated with safety and sameness, which could be another word for “easiness,” and staying in Chinatown is equal to remaining ignorant. Chinatown is represented as a backward place, and is personified as Mah, who stays in and is in charge of the safe place and demands that the daughters do the same.

The self-sacrificing mother is, however, not the whole picture of Mah. The novel is a story of Leila in search of Mah, and there are chances for her to realize that Mah is not always racial Mother. As she ascends to the past against the timeline, she tries to see Mah against the culturally constructed image of the Chinese mothers. Wong says that, “To me, the motif of quasi-cannibalism is most intriguing when read against the ‘model minority’ thesis, which while invoking the American immigrant myth, assiduously searched traditional Asian cultures for clues to the Asian American success story” (37) because it has a possibility to demystify the Asian immigrant family as a “greatly romanticized institution” (38) that produces successful children who live American Dream. Quasi-cannibalism is a symptom of a gap between Asian American realities and its mainstream representations, and thus it could disclose the

gap. Then, it is possible to say that when Leila stops eating Mah's offering, or when she stops eating Mah's meats along with culturally invested meanings that she is supposed to internalize and reproduce, she could detach herself from the sense of guilt.

Leila has to reconsider Mah out of Chinatown's cultural codes of filial duty, and at the same time, she has to recognize Mah's own desire and choice to stay in Chinatown. Mah is not always racial Mother who meets the requirement of racial solidarity and the American model minority myth. In the following section, I will analyze how Mah's own desire is represented and recognized by Leila.

iv. Erotic Maternal Body

As she revisits Ona's suicide, Leila remembers some events that highlight Mah's images and seem to defy the codes of racial Mother. When Mah arranges a funeral for her paper father-in-law alone because Leon is at sea, she collapses under the weight of the responsibilities. Leila who watches Mah breaking down in her working place says, "Seeing Mah in Tommie Hom's [her boss and ex-other man's] arms, I knew there was more to it than just finding Grandpa Leong. It had to do with Leon being gone so much, it had to do with the monotony of her own life. It wasn't just death that upset Mah, it was life, too" (79). Diane LeBlanc regards Mah's affair

with Tommie as her “resistance” (15) that could defy the typical representation of Chinese immigrant women. She argues,

Mah rejects the terms of her role as a green card wife when she seeks personal fulfillment beyond the given parameters of that identity. Ng’s creation of a more complex, realistic character challenges the stories which comprise Leila’s cultural history. Mah’s social failure offers hope for Leila through a different, albeit difficult, story. (16)

The episode of Mah’s affair reveals her erotic body that exists for her own desire and seeks “personal fulfillment.” This erotic maternal body defies the typical image of the self-sacrificing immigrant mother and the green card wife.

To overcome the distress caused by Grandpa’s funeral, Mah sews “harder” (79), and Leila does the same after she and Mah fight (66). Sewing is one of the few things Leila and Mah share. When Leon misses his welcome home dinner which Mah intends to be her apology for cheating on him, Mah retreats into her room and sews alone. Listening to the sound of Mah’s sewing machine, Leila says, “I heard it. The rattle and groan of the old Singer ... What was Mah feeling now? What did she regret? Tommie Hom? My father? Leon? How did Ona weigh on her heart?” (67).

Unlike the dinner scene previously discussed, Leila tries to imagine what Mah thinks. Leila’s imagination is, like the dinner scene at the end, based on the sounds, but here, she tries to resist thinking of Mah in a frame of racial Mother. She tries to think of

Mah as a person and in terms of her relationship with others.

Yoonmee Chang also shows another erotic representation of Mah, a friendship between Mah and Rosa, a Peruvian wife of Leon's business partner, Luciano who later betrays the family in business. Leila describes them, "Mah and Rosa were like sisters. They joked that they sewed more than they slept, and sewing side by side, they were more intimate with each other than with their husbands" (161). Their relationship is more than a topic of joke because Mah's relationship with others suggests that she has an intimate relationship outside the family. Chang says that "they are queer sisterhoods. This is intimated in the erotic charge of Mah and Rosa's relationship" (108). Their relationship is not like the one between like Leon and Luciano which is based on Leon's courtship of Luciano. Mah and Rosa teach things to each other and Mah does not care about Rosa's ethnicity like other women in the sweatshop. These episodes reveal the other sides of Mah with the personal desires and life.

The mother as other also comes from another direction. Right after Leila is tempted to stay in Chinatown by the memory of the family dinner, she remembers another thing about Mah.

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

think I even expected him to come back as my father. But it was always Leon Leong, in his starched whites, his burnt-sugar tan, his S.S. *Independent* laundry sack full of presents.

I finally saw what Mason had been saying all along: Mah loved Leon. (190)

Young Leila expects Leon to be her biological father. She tries to assimilate alterity represented as the father-in-law with the biological unity, a family, of the mother and the daughter. On the other hand, Leila looks forward to Leon's return as other, which is symbolized as "laundry sack full of presents," a bag full of unexpectedness. She forces an image of her ideal father on Leon to make her family look more politically correct while she expects unchanged alterity in him and lets him be as he is. His uncontrollableness as other is also represented as the considerable pages of the novel spent on Leila's search for Leon and her attempt to take him home, which she fails in most of the cases. Mah is represented as a woman who loves a man who is always a stranger to Leila. If Mah has a relationship with the other who always remains other, Mah could also be the other that she never fully understands. The quotation above is a moment when Leila rediscovers Mah's desire to stay with Leon in Chinatown and sees her beyond the image of racial Mother. Leon's otherness makes Leila realize there is a possibility that Mah is also other with her own desire.¹⁰ There is an aspect

¹⁰ Leon plays another important role in demystifying the idealized maternal figure. In the quoted lines, a giver, who is often assigned to maternal figures, is represented with a paternal figure. Father as a giver is also depicted when Leon buys Leila a suede

of Mah that she has not recognized, of Mah who loves Leon.¹¹

After Leila recognizes Mah's own desire, she no longer has to read Mah's self-sacrifice in every action she takes. After Leila talks about Mah's affair with Tommie Hom and the collapse of the family, the opposite plots of racial Mother's model minority story, there is a scene in which Mah gives Leila and Mason a box of dim sum. Leila unconsciously reads the cultural meaning of the self-sacrificing mother and the filial duty in the meaty bones (28-30), but here she does not read any cultural meaning in it (186). Mah with her own desire makes her an ambivalent figure that could not easily be reduced to the fixed image of Asian American women that is exploited in Orientalism or in the market economy that seeks cheaper labor without complaints. Mah's body is also no longer reduced to a womb and breasts for her children. It exists for her own desire to stay in Chinatown to love Leon. As Leila sees Mah's other face, an imagined umbilical cord between Mah and Leila is cut loose.

Although Leila does not have to hold back from moving out of Chinatown because of her guilt there is still a question; what does being a Chinese American woman mean to Leila? The question would be more urgent outside Chinatown. After

shoulder bag (183). If "maternal" would sound too feminine for male figures, it could be said that he is represented not as a typical paternal character that takes away something from children or restricts them with law.

¹¹ Argument of Mah's affection toward Leon is not to privatize the economic situation of Chinese Americans and mask it with a romantic love story because it is obvious that their relationship is strained by the discriminatory division of labor based on gender and race (or more precisely, gendered race).

she rediscovers Mah's own desire, her portrayal of Chinatown could also be rediscovered and changed, and she has to re-describe herself. If she stops seeing Chinatown in a prejudiced way, it could lead her to deconstruct the dichotomy that separates Chinatown from the world outside. Next I will analyze how she narrates herself and avoids impossible "syncretism" of Asian and American that places her in a god-like position.

v. Chinese/American/Women, or Tactics of "Backdare"

As she is in conflict between Mah and Mason, Leila often finds herself in dilemmas. She works as an intermediate between school and parents, and she is often in a dilemma because she can understand the parents' way while she has to tell the American way of raising children. She also functions as a translator for the parents, and she is sick of the responsibility. She attributes Ona's suicide to her being stuck in between as a second daughter, but she herself is stuck in between. Leila's "in-betweenness" is directly represented in her identity as a Chinese American woman, but who is a Chinese American woman? Child as a translator for the parents is a recurring motif in Chinese American writers' novels, but is she just a convenient translator for Chinese immigrants and other native English speakers? Is she merely a cultural translator for the readers?

Leila, eating with Nina in a restaurant outside New York Chinatown, is spoken to by a Spanish waiter who seems interested in Nina. ““You two Chinese?” he asked. ‘No.’ I let my irritation fill the word. ‘We’re two sisters’” (34). Right before this, Leila decides to marry Mason in New York so that she could avoid a banquet that she feels obliged to hold for Mah, who is always invited to wedding ceremonies, but never invites others. A lunch with Nina makes her decide to leave Chinatown and fulfill her own desires. As I argued above, the departure from Chinatown could free her spiritually from Chinatown codes of the filial duty. So her “irritation” could be read as her annoyance for those who try to push her back to Chinatown based on her race. As an answer to the Spanish waiter’s question, she says, “We’re two sisters.” If the answer is her objection to those who recognize her only by her race, how could it be interpreted?

“Sister” mentioned by Leila probably shares an idea that Yoonmee Chang advocates to describe the political sisterhood that is not based on biological ethnicity like the one between Mah and Rosa. Leila and Nina are, in the eyes of the Spanish waiter, definitely Asian whether they speak in English or Chinese, but Leila denies her Chineseness. Also in a strict sense, they are not full biological sisters, but she also denies this fact. She denies every biologically destined factor of her identity. Of course her denial does not change anything in the reality. The waiter would still think

they are Asians, and she has difficulty explaining why she and Ona have different family names when she speaks to a police officer. But I'd like to consider her denial as a sign of her choice to look for a way to describe herself in her own way; to re-describe her own discourse beyond race, a discourse that does not totally depend on biological facts.

Here again, Phillipa Kafka's idea of "syncretism" comes up as a seemingly ideal solution to Leila's struggle to gain a new identity. Kafka considers "syncretism" as a union of the old and the new, Chineseness and Americanness or East and West at large. She also considers "syncretism" as Leila's solution to re-describe herself, which is a typical idealization of in-betweenness as a transcending identity, an identity beyond the racial opposition (Kafka 52). She also says that, quoting Elaine Kim, syncretism is a need for balance between two emphases, and considers the novel as "Ng's effort to syncretize East and West in order to achieve balance" (53). "Balance," Kim's wording, is a problematic word because it means that the two emphases are something stable on which one can stand to keep impossible impartiality. The word, "balance," assumes that two emphases are stable and that there are eternal truths of Chineseness and Americanness.

Kafka's reading that tries to solve the dichotomies actually preserves them. If, following Kafka's argument that Asian American women must not forget the past,

Nina would be condemned to be a wrong model for Asian American women. Diane LeBlanc argues that Kafka's classification of Nina as an ungrateful postfeminist "creates the binary feminist/postfeminist ... Predicating Leila's self-affirmation on a feminist/postfeminist binary creates opposition between sisters ... that one woman's self affirmation depends on her negation of another" (19). According to Kafka, feminism and postfeminism are fixed discourses and one has to reject one to choose another. This not only limits a frame of feminism as LeBlanc says, but also could lead to a limitation of representation of Asian American women figures because Kafka's list of the binaries includes the West/East binary and her solution based on negation of the another preserves the structure of the binary.

Instead of Kafka's problematic idea of "syncretism," LeBlanc proposes,

As an alternative to syncretism, the conclusion may suggest the inevitability of ambiguity. Ng's use of the bicultural neologism "backdaire [back there]," mimicking the "updaire [up there]" sign in Salmon Alley, suggests her awareness that although Leila may accept difference by facing dualism, living with it still poses obstacles within the mundane and the spiritual. (19-20)

Leila *may* accept difference, but it does not mean that the difference is solved. It means "living with it." The word "backdaire" keeps Leila's problem open because "Ng's creation of language that simultaneously rejects the dominant discourse and threatens to impede Leila's access to power through that discourse acknowledges the

material reality of living with difference” (13). The word does not solve and close the question of her identity, but keeps it problematic and open as her ongoing reality. The word acknowledges Leila as an agent in touch with the reality. Leila’s tactic is not an easy way like Kafka’s argument that suggests that Leila’s problematic life ends as the novel ends with the one-time solution. LeBlanc warns that “Leila’s quest ends in self-affirmation that is only momentary” (21), and that Leila’s tactic is not a one-time survival way to syncretize the differences. Leila’s more sustainable way to deal with difference is to live with it and to negotiate with it because the difference itself changes and transforms.

I’d like to further analyze the word “backdaire” to illuminate Leila’s tactic to negotiate with her identity. The paragraph in which the word appears reads, “I was reassured. I knew what I held in my heart would guide me. So I wasn’t worried when I turned that corner, leaving the old blue sign, Salmon Alley, Mah and Leon—everything—backdaire” (191). Although Leila says she leaves everything, the components of the word, English and Chinese-accented English are what she uses or is exposed to in her life. The word itself oscillates Leila between Chinatown and the outside, and does not allow her to stay on the one side. Using such a “mongrel” word symbolizes Leila’s position that never settles in one place.

This, however, does not mean that Leila is free from her Chinatown

experience and past. When she realizes Mah's love for Leon, she also notices that the past is an essential part of her identity and a force that keeps her alive. She says,

I believe that the secrets we hold in our hearts are our anchors, that even the unspoken between us is a measure of our every promise to the living and to the dead. And all our promises, like all our hopes, move us though life with the power of an ocean liner pushing through the sea. (190)

She no longer considers her Chinatown experience and Chinese American identity as a burden that prevents her access to power, but as the "promise," or a connection that links her with the reality and the history ("to the living and to the dead"). This is not a simple return to the biological facts that defines her ethnic identity. She, instead, considers her past as a cultural construct that enables her to access the reality and history, from which mother-daughter relationships have been traditionally expelled. Leila chooses her subject to be in touch with reality and history so that she could bring her daughter subject in relation to Mah out of the de-historicized space of Chinatown.

Leila's use of the neologism "backdaire" symbolizes her re-describing herself as a subject formed on a recognition of the reality as an ever-changing cultural, political construct. From 1960s to 1990s, an approximate time setting of the novel, China had seen tremendous changes and it heavily affected the American view of

China and Chinese American societies. Leila herself says that the historical facts of old China that represent the typical mystic images of China are “all stories to us [Nina, Ona and Leila]” (33). Even old China’s historical facts could not restrain her cultural identity. What torments the family is not the curse of Leon’s paper father’s homeless bone, but the discriminatory society that keeps the family poor. As the old China stories are no longer the reality to her, she would know that things change.

Even the motif of bones, something essential for structures, changes its meanings throughout the novel. A bone might be seen as an undisturbed essence, a symbol of fixity, which could be associated with Chinese Americans’ biological and ethnic identity as unchangeable facts. But in the novel, the bone is invested with various meanings and its meaning is never fixed, just like an unknown reason for Ona’s suicide. The bone first appears as a metaphor of Chinatown gossip, but it turns into the origin of curse on the family, a bitter memory of the sisters’ childhood, Chinese paternal heritage to the children, and Mah’s sewing term. The changing meanings of bones imply that fixity in the novel is impossible. And its change is subtle that sometimes people do not notice it just like Grandpa Leong’s bone is moved to another place without any notice to the family.

This “unfixity” is also shown in Leila’s ability to see things from two perspectives. When she visits a student’s home, she has compassion for their poverty

as the one who experiences it before, but still she can also be stern and do things in an American way (14-15). This does not mean that she is a god-like person who can see things in an impartial way. She chooses the one way over the other according to the situation. Leila chooses to deal in an American way with the immigrant parents who want her to do things in a Chinese way. Choice is always situational and negotiatory. Leila's subject is not free from the cultural restraints and she has to choose to be an American or a Chinese person because others recognize her in either way. The cultural and historical restraints are not fixed, and they enable her to have agency, to access her Chinese American woman's reality.

vi. Way Out to the Mother

As she reconfigures Chinatown, Mah and herself, Leila's relationship with Mah also transforms. As I did in the chapter of *The Woman Warrior*, I'd like to analyze how the mother-daughter relationship is affected by Leila's reconfiguration of Chinatown and re-description of her identity. Like Brave Orchid recognizes the heroine's desire to stay away from Chinatown, Leila's decision to leave Chinatown is supported by Mah. When Leila first tells Mah about moving out of Chinatown, Mah allows it while offering her a way back home, and this could be considered another attempt not to settle in one place.

... “Mah,” I said, looking up, “I’m going to move to the Mission with Mason.”

... She looked me in the mirror. It was quiet for a long time. I thought, I do look like her. The shape of the face, the single fold above the eye, the smallish round mouth. I wonder, Will I be like her? Will I marry like her? ...

“No Chinese there, you know,” she said ...

“Why not get married?” she asked. She still wouldn’t look at me.

“I’ll see how it goes,” I said. For a minute I expected the worst, that she’d slap me, hit me with a hanger, call me names.

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

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

In the scene, Leila helps Mah choose a dress for Leon’s coming home dinner.

Watching Mah’s choosing a special dress for Leon, Leila recognizes that Mah cares for Leon, of which Leila is always not sure. Because Leila is not assured that Mah is happy with Leon, she hesitates to leave her in Chinatown alone with Leon. This scene predicts the dinner scene in the ending and Leila’s recognition of Mah’s love for Leon.

The dress selection scene also resembles the dinner scene in a way Leila is tempted to identify herself with Mah. The intimacy created by the mirrored images of the mother and the daughter could be read in the similar way a Joy Luck mother realizes how she and the daughter are culturally separated even though they look alike in the mirror (Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* 304). Given that Leila decides to lead a separate life from her mother’s, the intimacy of the facial similarities is another trap

that tries to catch Leila in the imagined maternal space although with the fear of the failed marriage this time. She associates their facial similarities with their destinies, but she stops the association in the end of the scene, declaring that she is moving out of Chinatown. When she thinks that Mah would slap her in the face, she is surprised by Mah, who actually agrees with her idea of living with Mason without marrying him. The surprise by Mah's unexpected answer is another sign that Mah and Leila are different persons and Leila could lead a life differently from Mah's.

Since Leila disentangles Mah from the gloomy Chinatown, leaving Chinatown does not necessarily mean rejecting Mah, and in fact, the way back to her mother is offered by Mah. Having "a way out" is advice that Mah learns from her experience, and also her recognition of the new generational way of thinking, a woman living with a man without being married to him. With Mah's advice, Leila could leave Chinatown while she keeps a way back home.¹² Leila does not need to abandon Mah though she leaves her. In traditional plots of mother-daughter relationships, the daughter always has to choose one over the other. If she chooses a man, she has to leave the mother like in Grimm's "Ashypet (Cinderella)" and "Snow-White" which

¹² Mah does not clearly say that Leila could come back to Mah in Chinatown, but Mah considers Leila's leaving as "a test." That implies that if the result is not good, Leila could come back to where she lives, Salmon Alley. When Mah is dumped by the first husband, she has nowhere to turn to until Tommie Hom hires her. So I consider the "way out" is Mah's offering of a returning place in Chinatown.

justify matricide for their evil deeds. If she chooses the mother, she is doomed to lead a gloomy life with the mother like Laura Wingfield in Tennessee William's *The Glass Menagerie*. Instead, *Bone* proposes a better solution for the mother-daughter separation, which does not totally depend on the daughter's decision, but also on the mother's. Leila's dilemma, a drive to choose the one way, is solved by Mah's letting her go and Mah's offering a place for Leila to return to. The place is no longer the imagined maternal place that forces the daughter to give up her autonomy in exchange of mother-daughter symbiosis, but where the mother and the daughter can recognize each other's independence. Mah, by offering Leila a way back to her, sets her free.

A possibility of another story of mother-daughter relationships is also symbolized in "backdaire." It is a word that reflects Leila herself, who leaves Mah while she keeps a way *back* to her. Because of Mah's offer, Leila does not have to fix herself in one place with Mason. It is a word that marks her decision not to remain on one side. The word signifies a certain direction behind Leila, but, at the same time, because of the ongoing negotiation within the word, it also brings back what Leila leaves there for its urgency. "Backdaire" problematizes what Leila leaves behind. Just like Leila keeps the reader thinking of reasons for Ona's suicide by continuing to ask why, the word that has alterity within and never settles in English sentences keeps asking what a Chinese American woman experience is. It leaves the problems open to

examinations and re-imaginings because situations change and probably there would be another way to exoticize and fix even Leila's story in a certain cultural frame. However, as long as there is the word, like the misspelled doorplate "updaire [up there]," which is repainted by someone and remains for a long time, it is obvious that Leila's story is still in question. This is not an easy way to leave the problem indeterminate. Leila's tactic is to keep the problem in question so that fixation should be difficult. It is not to put an end to her Chinatown experience, but to leave it open, to "have a way out" of fixation of any image to her Chinese American woman experience.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

Using Asian American novels as textbooks could help students understand specific historical contexts of Asian Americans' experiences, but their representations should not be regarded as the universal fixed images. These fixed images, another name for stereotypes, not only function to misrepresent actual Asian Americans in general, but also rob them of their reality and their agency. There is no ultimate and ideal Asian American representation, but when the widespread cultural imagery of Asian Americans misrepresents them, it becomes problematic. *The Woman Warrior* and *The Joy Luck Club* are often regarded as the epitome of Asian American literature for their critical celebration and popularity, but given the fact that the novel is the writers' artistic representation of their unique experiences, these representations should not be considered as all Chinese Americans' reality. Oversimplification and exoticization of the novels overpowers individual voices that the writers intend to express in the novels.

One of the static images is found in the dominant readings of mother-daughter relationships in the popular Chinese American women writers' novels such as *The Woman Warrior* or *The Joy Luck Club*. The mother-daughter relationships in those novels are often celebrated as an empowering female bonding in a patriarchal society

of Chinatown or old China. The American-born daughters are often rescued by the Chinese immigrant mothers' secret survival stories of their Chinese days. This seemingly reciprocal process of the mothers' stories' transmission to the daughters is actually a problematic symptom of ghettoization of Chinese American women in Chinatown because their powerfulness is limited in the stories and Chinatown. In this thesis I have argued that this association of Chinatown with the maternal figures, the maternalization of Chinatown, hides their victimization with racism and sexism.

The feminization of Chinatown is also a result of the American national policies which shaped Chinatown's unbalanced gender ratio: many "bachelors" and few "prostitutes," which reinforced the mainstream perception of Chinatown as a mysterious and debauched area. In addition, those "Chinamen" often work as laundries or waiters, duties traditionally assigned to women. Through the mainstream culture, these images of Chinatown as a primitive and corrupting space are reproduced and reinforced.

So, in order to deal with the mothers, the daughter figures in *The Woman Warrior* and *Bone* first have to disentangle them from these culturally distorted images of Chinatown. The heroine of *The Woman Warrior* must recognize her mother as a victim in order to overcome the mystic image of Chinatown. In *Bone*, Leila has to recognize the other side of Mah's toilsome life to demystify the dismal image of

Chinatown. Their reconfiguration of Chinatown is closely linked with the correlation of personal and historical weight of the mother-daughter relationships and political reconstruction of their perception of America at large because, after all, Chinatown is part of America.

The daughter heroines' reconfiguration of Chinatown is their textual resistance to the tendencies that generalize and oversimplify their experience and realities. The daughters' choice to avoid the mothers' steps is not to reject them, but to disentangle them from the cultural imagery of Chinatown mothers, to avoid reproduction of silence. This is why literary texts are important for their various artistic representations. They provide readers personal, unique voices of each Chinese American's reality and experience, which are often overlooked in the reductive readings of the novels and the de-contextualizing anthologizing of the certain chapters of the novels. These personal voices, even if fictionalized, offer hope that the range of Asian American literature will be widened beyond its racialized frame.

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