

**Gender in Southeast Asian-American Immigrant
Female Literature in the 20th Century**

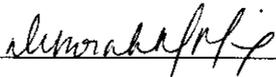
An Honor's Thesis

By

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Abstract:

My thesis seeks to explore the way that gender influences both the writing and representation of character in the following texts: Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*, Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*. I also examine how gender affects the themes of education, paternal relationships and ancestry/ghosts in each text. I argue that the authors utilize their works to establish a new identity that is not solely Chinese or solely American, but rather a combination of both. The themes listed above highlight how this identity has been forged, while showing that America is the site upon which these changes are made.

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Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*, Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, and Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* each explore the experiences of Chinese-Americans adapting to American culture. The books seek to establish a new understanding of what Chinese-American identity is. Every work uses the ideas of education, paternal relationships and ancestry, especially the gendered ways these ideas are constructed, in order to explore the new cultural traditions that Chinese-American society necessitates. The authors each use their works to find a hybrid identity rooted not just in China or America but rather in both nations. For the texts, America is the focal point of the breaks in these systems of traditional Chinese culture; it both ignites and enables the changes shown in the books. The ideas of education, paternal relations, and ancestry become the sites upon which the separation is noticeable, and through these themes, each author investigates the ways that these ideas have changed, specifically for women, in America.

Fae Myenne Ng's novel *Bone*, revolves around one character, Leila, and her struggles with handling and understanding her family. The recent suicide of the middle daughter, Ona, has caused a rupture in the family relations, which Leila tries to repair throughout the novel. *Bone* explores not just familial relationships, but Chinese-American familial relationships; Ng uses this cultural context and shows how this identity complicates the story. As a second generation immigrant, Leila is an American citizen and moves fluidly in American society. She, however, must assist both her parents in negotiating and establishing their identities in America. This assistance leads to one of the major conflicts in the text. The critic Donald C. Goellnicht presents this conflict as a struggle "with a complex Chinese American identity that repudiates either/or choices, but

at the same time finds it difficult to adopt both/and positions of an integrated subjectivity” (313). I would argue that though this assessment is true throughout the majority of the novel, by the final pages, Leila finds an identity for herself that accepts the both/and position. The critic Thomas W. Kim argues that “the novel reveals how identity, and especially ethnic American identity, is a negotiation of terms and significations” (53). Leila finds a way to reconcile both her American and Chinese identities; she begins a life free from the overwhelming influence of her parents, without wholly abandoning them or her Chinese background.

Jade Snow Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter* shows a similar separation from the parents. The autobiography traces the life of one young, second-generation Chinese-American as she struggles to find her place in the world. Though she begins her life as a traditional, obedient Chinese daughter, after years of education (extraordinary education for a Chinese woman), she begins to question her own background. During college, she breaks from her parents’ influence and begins to set up a niche for herself that defies the conventions of Chinese culture. By asserting her independence and excelling in her chosen profession of pottery, she gains the respect of both her parents and the community. In this way, Wong uses the opportunities America offers her to enact a new identity that combines both Chinese and American culture. By the end of her narrative, Wong is comfortable in a both/and position and readily accepts her dual identity.

Maxine Hong Kingston’s *China Men* is a departure from the two previous texts. Written as a companion piece to her earlier work, *Woman Warrior*, this text follows the lives of her male ancestors as they make their way from China to America. The critic

Leilani Nishime states that in this book, “Kingston gestures towards a history of Chinese-Americans in America that is beyond her family history, yet the quirkiness of each individual characterization prevents the creation of a single individual who represents the norm of Chinese-American experience” (70). I would agree that *China Men* in many ways serves as a microcosm of the Chinese-American experience, but it does not presume to offer the only view of that experience. Kingston uses the personal references and characters to write a specifically familial history that has elements reflective of Chinese-American culture as a whole. Kingston gives a voice to her ancestors and relatives who had previously been silent, but she does not negate the possibility of other voices in the community.

Education

In Fae Myenne Ng’s *Bone*, the main character Leila must bridge the gap in cultures and education both in her personal and professional life. Because her parents have no sons, she, as the eldest daughter, must take on the responsibility of supporting her family. Leila remembers the resentment she felt during her childhood, translating English for her parents. She feels that “every English word was like a curse” (Ng 17). English was a curse not just because Leila was embarrassed by her parents but also because her education separates her from her parents. She can do more and understand more than either of her parents because of her education and her ability to negotiate between America and China.

As Leila's experience indicates, education in these texts is a means of separation as well as a means of negotiation between cultures. Education is more than that, though; it can be a locus upon which people connect and associate; it can be the division that separates old world from new; it can inspire rebellion; or it can be a death sentence in company where education is scorned. In these works, education is gendered; America is the place where education can either give or take away opportunities. Because education was available to men in China, America does not further their opportunities, but rather limits their options. America, though, helps heal the separations between the educated man and his community. Women, however, can take the opportunities available in America and use them to achieve a level of education they otherwise would not have had. Their learning, therefore, elevates them in American culture, separating them from the traditional Chinese culture. Despite this separation, the women learn how to use their education to heal the rift between their lives and traditional Chinese culture and combine both their Chinese and American sides.

In the above example, Leila's uneasiness with English as a language comes in when she is young and cannot bridge the gap between America and China. English is a burden, one that she alone carries in the family. The struggle to live in both cultures and to navigate between the cultures becomes easier as she ages. English does not remain a curse because she can accept the fact that her job is to close the space between the cultures. America has given her the education but has effected her discomfort with her role. But as she ages, education gives her the tools necessary to become comfortable as a translator, an option unavailable in China.

In her adult personal life, she must assist her stepfather Leon in communicating with the American government to keep his employment. As a “paper son” of a “paper father,” Leon illegally entered the United States, and to protect himself, Leon collects every scrap of paper he has received from the government since his immigration. Kim states that “the papers Leon has amassed over the years function to authenticate his presence in the U.S.” (43). Leon, however, does not understand enough English to convincingly seek the help of the government for things like Social Security. Thus, Leila must act as his intermediary and help him to legitimize his position in the United States. Kim argues that “his use of broken English, which excludes and disempowers him” (49) is mediated by Leila’s presence. She feels an obligation to her parents (specifically Leon) to assist them as translator; though this position gives her much power over them, it also entails a huge responsibility for their well being. Leila’s role of caretaker of the family, therefore, is only compounded by her education and ability to negotiate between the two cultures.

Leila is also employed in the public school system in San Francisco and helps serve as a translator for the Chinese families in the district. She describes herself as “being the bridge between the classroom teacher and the parents” (Ng 16). Leila experiences difficulties that result from her cultural gap because most immigrant parents she encounters hold fast to the ways of China. Her efforts, therefore, take on a resemblance to missionary work, proselytizing the values of the American educational system to immigrant families. Her approach is non-threatening, and often, she is

unsuccessful. Because she is a woman, and therefore is not an authority to these families, she struggles to maintain what little power she does hold. Her education splits her from the Chinese culture but also gives her the tools to reconnect to that culture.

Similarly, in *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, Jade Snow Wong shows how education can both separate and divide a female from the Chinese culture. Because she is raised in America, she may attend school, an opportunity unknown in China. Her father comments on the shortsightedness of China's educational policies toward women, stating, "if nobody educates his daughters, how can we have intelligent mothers for our sons?" (Wong 15). Thus, Jade Snow Wong's education begins merely as a means to benefit future generations, and by extension, China as a whole, rather than as an attempt to improve her as an individual. As her life progresses, however, education becomes the way in which Wong embraces parts of the American culture, without completely abandoning her Chinese heritage.

From her earliest days, Wong was expected to attend both Chinese and American schools, devoting most of her extra time to study. She also displayed a proclivity for learning that her younger sister did not share. Therefore, the expectation that she would do well was automatic, and the fact that she did was never celebrated. When she announced that she had skipped two grades, her parents' only reply was "that is as it should be" (Wong 19). This instance highlights the fact that the education was not really meant for just Wong's benefit but was an expectation that would fulfill her duties as a woman. Her parents do not praise her intelligence or her accomplishment and barely even comment on her abilities. She receives no further encouragement, but had she not

done so well, she likely would have received punishment for not doing as a woman should. Despite the lack of praise, though, she continues to embrace her education and to work as she was expected.

When the time for college arrived, the education that had previously been expected of her was now denied to her by her father. When she asks for his help to pay for tuition, he simply tells her that “the sons must have priority over the daughters” (Wong 108), and he could not afford to finance both her education and her brothers’. This conflict allows Wong to question her parents’ ideas, though not for the first time, and act upon her beliefs that her parents are wrong. Katheleen Loh Swee Yin and Kristoffer F. Paulson claim in their essay “The Divided Voice of Chinese-American Narration: Jade Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter*” that “Wong is intensely aware of the injustice of her apparent insignificance as a girl and strives to break through the bonds of Chinese tradition” (54). This awareness leads her to assert her independence, and she decides to pay for college on her own. The rebellion against her parents in this matter leads to rebellions in other things, and eventually, Wong begins to lead her own life, despite her parents’ wishes and expectations. Education, therefore, becomes the catalyst in which Wong can assert her own independence without severing the ties to Chinese tradition.

Just as education helps Wong to state her independence from her family, it also offers her an opportunity to connect with her community. After her schooling, during her employment, Wong writes an essay regarding absenteeism that wins a statewide

contest. Because of her victory, her entire community and her family are proud of her, seeing her true value as an educated person, and not just as a receptacle for knowledge from which later generations can glean. Her community respects and admires her, and they allow her to begin her own business, a fairly uncommon thing for the time. Yin and Paulson state that “her actions require that her family and her community recognize her independence and that Chinese-American women can be persons in their own right” (55). Her success suggests the possibility for other women’s success, as well as a new definition for the role of Chinese-American women. By using the skills learned in America, Wong can live a life different from expectation, but she also uses her difference to achieve an exceptional place and a lot of respect in her neighborhood. Thus, her education wins her place in her environment that a woman could not conventionally hold.

In *China Men*, Maxine Hong Kingston demonstrates the duality of education, displaying both its faults and its benefits. Respect and derision coincide because of this one institution. The experience of education in this piece is decidedly male, and obligatory to those who show a capacity for it. Learning, however, is also a wedge that drives her father from his home and her mother. Knowledge does not gain him swift entrance into America, nor does it keep her father from being cheated by his friends. Education is, therefore, a double-edged sword, which can either serve or hinder the men who use it.

In America, education for men is a hindrance rather than opportunity. Because men were the only ones educated in China, America does not offer them their first

for education, especially if they were born to education. For men in China, in fact, education is almost a matter of destiny. When Kingston relates the story of her father's birth, recording her grandmother's remarks, "Look at the length of his hand and fingers [. . .] This kind of hand was made for holding pens" (Kingston 16), she implies that her father was born to a life of study. Male, and deemed scholarly, her father has no choice but to devote his life to the pursuit of knowledge. He proves adept and passes his exam, though not with the highest marks. He avoids shame but does not attain glory. He is, therefore, caught in a limbo of nothingness, which estranges him from those around him.

Leslie Rabine argues that "the father as an intellectual is allowed to play the role of the feminine without being outcast, humiliated or deprived of male status" (103). I would disagree and contend that Maxine's father does suffer alienation, which is most noticeable during his work with his pupils. They rebel and "spoil a teacher's authority" (Kingston 36), leaving him virtually helpless. Though scholars are praised in China, his authority is mocked. His knowledge is not a sure sign of his success. The implications of his failure suggest that his isolation does not derive solely from his special status as teacher in the community, but rather from the resentment of those who do not appreciate him. He is not a nationally known scholar, yet, he is of a higher status than the simple peasants in his village. His separation from his community, therefore, becomes complete, and he cannot join them again.

He builds upon his ideological separation and enacts actual, physical separation. His immigration to America is ridiculed by his family, who wonder what use books will be on the railroad. Julia Lisella maintains that "to move him out of the laboring class,

does not guarantee him any special privileges in America” (67). Her argument, as well as the family’s fears, prove to be validated because Americans believe he is not educated, “needing a translator” (Kingston 58). His education is of no use to him, and he becomes just like every other Chinese man in the country. It takes immigration to reconnect Kingston’s father with his fellow Chinese and to allow him to live among them peaceably. “America will be the great class equalizer” (Lisella 61) and becomes the place that allows a reunion with the Chinese culture; it is the removal of the educationally elite status that allows this reconciliation to occur. America, therefore, robs him of his education and establishes his similarity to his fellow immigrants.

These texts show how education in America relates to the gender of the person seeking the education. Because Chinese females in these texts have the chance, for the first time, to seek an education, they can use America to find their place in their community and in American culture. For men, though, education in America is a barrier to joining their community. However, because America does not recognize or validate Chinese education, men essentially lose their elite, intellectual status and become the same as everyone else in their community. These texts, therefore, demonstrate the dualistic nature of education and help display both its positives and negatives. These texts reveal the possible roles of education in the Chinese-American culture and how these characters can successfully combine their Chinese and American sides.

Paternal Relations

“‘Daddy’! The affectionate tone of this word pleases me. Hereafter, you children shall address me as ‘Daddy’” (Wong 12). An entire relationship is summed up in two

sentences in one of the early chapters in Jade Snow Wong's autobiography. These sentences illustrate the mingling of affection and command at the same moment. The children call their father Daddy because he asks them to, but they actually feel the real affection that this word symbolizes. The fact that the affection was demanded sets up an interesting and revealing paternal relationship.

The relationship between father and daughter is one of the most important relationships in these texts. Though not all of these relationships are as domineering and rigidly maintained as the previous example, each holds an important place in the characters lives. The relationship with the father helps the daughter both to establish her place in the world and to better understand her father's place in the world. Each daughter's relationship with her father helps her to navigate and find her place in America. Each character uses her relationship with her father to grow, and this relationship reflects in other parts of her lives, influencing how she responds in other aspects of her life. In essence, the father-daughter relationship helps the characters to create a place in the world for themselves as well as to assist their fathers in finding their own places in the world.

Wong tries to find her own place in the world, despite her parents' restrictions. Though certain of her parents' love, Wong remarks on how little affection was actually displayed in her family. When her fourth-grade teacher comforts her by giving her a hug, Wong first realizes the absence of this tenderness. She does not feel unloved in her family because her parents take such care to instruct her and discipline her, yet open

tenderness is not a common occurrence in her family. Affection is something guarded by rules and codes of behavior, and usually her father dictates those rules. Even the most simple display of love and familiarity must be approved by her father, and though he loves his children, he does not often show it.

Instead of affection, her father most often displays his caring through discipline and instruction. He wishes to educate his daughters and allow them to take advantage of the American system. To insure their success, he personally supervises each daughter's Chinese education, including extensive cooking and Chinese lessons. Though his attention shows his care, he also demands unquestioning obedience from Wong. This expectation leads to one of the main conflicts in her life: her wish to receive further education and her father's disapproval of this pursuit. Because the family was no longer in China and because his daughters received an extraordinary education, unquestioning obedience was no longer an appropriate demand upon his children.

Wong asserts that this authority is unacceptable, and she, as Yin and Paulson maintain, "questions and rejects the Chinese conventions which no longer apply in the context of the duality of experience she faces" (56). She defies her parents by stating that she is "an individual besides being [their] fifth daughter" (Wong 128). After this dispute, though, a new relationship is carefully forged between father and daughter. This relationship is built upon respect and understanding, rather than upon superiority and obedience. Because of this new relationship, Jade Snow can gain a new respect and perspective concerning her parents, while they can also learn a new way to see their daughter.

After her new relationship with her father, Wong can seek a life different from most other Chinese-American women of the time. Her father sees her independence, but now is willing to assist her in her newfound goals. When she wishes to open her own pottery business, he assists her in making arrangements. As she proves to be successful in her work, her father becomes proud of her. In his final speech, he tells her, "You do not realize the shameful and degraded position into which the Chinese culture has pushed its women. Here in America, the Christian concept allows women their freedom and individuality. I wish my daughters to have this Christian opportunity" (Wong 246). In this statement, her father reveals his love and his care for his daughter and sees that the realization of his dream can allow him to love his daughter without condition, and to finally and openly express his affection for her.

Wong's autobiography shows the dynamics of the father-daughter relationship in America. The expected obedience of a daughter in China cannot continue in America. Ironically, it is her father's insistence concerning her education that leads to her abandonment of the expected obedience. His desires for his children and his expectations for their behavior are in direct contrast with one another. Therefore, in seeking their education and advancement, he also receives an education from his daughter about how she should be treated. Wong sees her father, consequently, move from an absolute leader to a role model she can love and with whom she is an equal.

Leila, the main character in *Bone*, is also attempting to find her own place in the world. In searching for her role, she also suffers from conflicts with her stepfather, Leon, though her conflicts do not arise from a demand for obedience. Leon differs from the

stereotypical Chinese-American man in several ways, but most importantly in his attitudes regarding his daughters. Although Leila is technically only his stepdaughter, Leon treats her as his own and is proud to claim her. Though he never had any sons, which causes people to pity him, Leon shrugs away their comments saying, "Five sons don't make one good daughter" (Ng 3). Nearly everyone of their acquaintance would view his opinions as rare and against the norm. Clearly, he considers his daughters to be good daughters, proudly telling everyone their accomplishments and becoming nearly overcome with grief over Ona's suicide.

Though Leila never collides with Leon over ideas of independence and education, she does not always get along well with him. Their relationship is troubled by the complicated factors that comprise it. Leila, as the oldest daughter, has always been responsible for taking care of the other kids, but also for mediating the troubles between her mother and Leon. They married more for convenience than love, and they are constantly "feuding about the past" (Ng 4). Occasionally Leon moves out, and Leila must continuously act as the intercessor, passing notes and gifts between the two, who are too stubborn to communicate themselves. Her role as mediator complicates the traditional power structure and places her in the role of parent.

Their relationship is compounded by the fact that she must also mediate for him with the government. Leon can speak little English, and Leila has always had to translate for him in official settings. When she was young, she spoke on both her parents behalf, resenting every time she had to say anything. "Every English word counted, and I was responsible" (Ng 17) for both the success of the translation, but also for acting in very

adult situations. Even as an adult, she has to continue in this role as intercessor with America. Kim states, "Leila and her stepfather Leon in particular must work within legal, political and familial discourses to establish their identities, their ancestry, and their cultural place in America" (42). I would contend, however, that Leila does the majority of the work to claim Leon's identity. Her ability to navigate between the two worlds gives her a power over her father. He must rely on her to understand the system, and as she tries to explain the system to him, this gives her superiority over him. She, in a way, becomes his caregiver, and she resents having to take care of someone who is supposed to take care of her.

Leila's continual frustration and her conflicts with her parents cause part of her discomfort. Not until she can learn to leave her parents to themselves, and not take on the role that they are so willing to give her, can she begin to let go of her resentment. She needs to find her own role, rather than merely accepting theirs. As she begins to take steps independent of their wishes, such as marrying her boyfriend without Leon's consent and moving out of her parents' apartment, she helps her father learn to live his own life without her continual help. She is now acting in a manner that will ensure her happiness rather than just assisting theirs.

Her relationship with Leon, though not the most important relationship in the story, does dictate many of Leila's actions. Being the oldest daughter naturally leads to the extension of her role of taking care of her mother and Leon. Though Leon is not her biological father, "it's time that makes a family, not just blood" (Ng 3), and Leon becomes her real father through the years. They clearly love each other, and this love

helps them to overcome the other obstacles in their relationship. When Leon meets Leila's father, he brings her information about him, without being jealous, because he knew that she wanted the information. This selfless position shows the true affection that exists between the two. Their affection allows them to understand one another, but to keep their independent positions in the world.

Maxine Hong's Kingston's relationship with her father plays a different role in her work *China Men*. Though no direct interaction occurs between the two in the book, the entire work serves as an interaction between Kingston and her male relatives. Through writing their stories, Kingston takes on a power similar to Leila's in *Bone*. She gives a voice to her father, grandfather, uncle and other male relatives that might otherwise not have had one. Lisella claims, "not only does she promise to expose the oppression that motivates her father's silent rage, but she promises to make room for that voice" (57). Instead of permitting her to act as a simple interpreter, this role gives her leave to create what they might say, literally speaking for them. She brings his story to the reader, offering a narrative of Chinese men in the United States. She presents supposition as fact, which enables her to create a whole history of which otherwise she, and we, would be ignorant.

In one chapter, Kingston describes her father as a man who "had the power of going places where nobody else went, and making places belong to him" (Kingston 238). As a child, she tries to get into these places with or without his permission, in order to understand him better. As an adult, she is still trying to get into his places, places that he will never tell her about. Only through her imagination can she discover her father and

her ancestors. This exploration of her patriarchy allows her to imagine life for her father and others, and to experience what they experienced. Therefore, a piece of history she might never have known can come alive for her and others. Though it may not be exact truth, it helps her to understand their relationship better. She can work out both figurative and literal ghosts and offer a way to “grant her male characters the speech denied to them both by outside racial oppression and by their own obedience to their culture’s definition of what is manly” (Lisella 57).

Ancestry and Ghosts

Kingston’s work embraces the idea of the using ghosts as characters. In one section, “The Making of More Americans,” immigrants literally talk to their dead relatives. A son who could not continue to send his mother money encounters the ghost of his mother as she berates him for his negligence. He replies, “Go home! Go back to China. Go home to China where you belong” (Kingston 176). These lines imply that ghosts are out of place in America. The ghost of his mother will not leave her son alone until he returns to China and heaps food on her grave.

In these texts, ancestry and ghosts have influence on the lives of the characters and narrators. Ghosts and the dead frame and determine the actions of the living throughout these texts. The dead leave a haunting specter behind that the living cannot ignore. In each book, the dead are almost as tangible as the living and sometimes become characters of their own. The dead represent Chinese culture, and when the culture is transplanted to America, the dead must take on a new role in the new Chinese-American

culture. Each text, though cognizant and knowledgeable about Chinese traditions concerning death, highlights how coming to America separates death and ghosts from their culture.

The above scene suggests the possible melding of two different cultures. Goellnicht argues that “the failure to be given a proper burial in the ancestral Chinese village can act as both a curse by the living against the dead and a threat by the dead against the living: ‘If you don’t bury me properly—in my ancestral home—then I will haunt and curse your existence in America’” (307). The ghost mother, therefore, can enter American space, but she is not content there. The son can return to America and live a normal American life, but only after appeasing his mother. The ghost serves as a reminder of China and necessitates the return home. However, the return is permanent only for the ghost. The ghost is buried in China, suggesting an end to the ties in China. The ancestry that originated in China dies there, quite literally. In fact, many of the older people who lived in America longed to have their bodies sent back to China in order to be buried there. The younger generation, though, does not maintain this tradition, and the bodies of the ancestors are disappointed in this effort. Thus, in this work America forces a split from tradition and a new acceptance of the American way of life. The son must appease his mother, but he can return to an Americanized life once she is gone.

In fact, because Kingston can put words in the mouths of her ancestors, she overturns the idea of ancestor worship. Though she listens to what they have to say, she creates their words, violating the subordinate role in the relationship. When she takes the power of speaking for them and from them, she gives herself a power to represent her

ancestors. This power takes form in America, and in a female voice, completely violating Chinese tradition. Her power of expression allows the idea of ancestors to hold a place in American culture, while not abandoning the traditions of old. The one ghost that can come to America causes insanity for her son that sees her. His burying of his past as he decorates his mother's grave allows him to end his ancestor worship. Similarly, Kingston's writing of her ancestors' graves allows her rid herself of the ghosts that haunt her. She can write them, appease them by giving them a voice and seek a new way of conceiving of death and ancestry in America.

Fifth Chinese Daughter relays a more traditional Chinese attitude toward ancestors and the dead. The narrative, though, does show the general erosion of the traditions of death. Her mother observes, "Here in America, mourning is not diligently practiced" (Wong 77). America does not have the time or the luxury for the long ceremonies of death. Some practices, though, are still maintained. Jade Snow and her family go to attend the graves of their ancestors with yearly vigor and ritual. The graves in America, though, are just temporary. Death is an institution that belongs to and in China. The dead that are buried in America have their graves decorated every year as a way to compensate for the fact that the bones are not buried in the family graveyard.

Through these observations, Wong shows the difficulties of death in America. America is a brief holding area for the bodies of those who do not belong to the country. The dead leave in ways that the living cannot. Their return home shows the rejection of the American culture. This rejection, however, belongs solely to the older generations.

The younger generations do not long to return to China to be buried because China is not their home. Thus, in death this separation between the older generations and their descendants is clearly delineated. Wong shows that while she is a part of this land, the bones of her ancestors can never be.

In *Bone*, the distance between China and Ng's characters is so great that virtually no talk of returning home to China appears in the text. Though Leon feels responsible for maintaining his "paper" father's grave, he does not even really remember where he is buried. In addition, the family finds that their grandfather's grave has been moved, along with those of thousands of other Chinese. These bones have little chance of returning to their homeland and seem destined to remain in the graves in America. Despite the failure to repatriate their ancestors' bones, the families still remember their loved ones. As one man observes, "Sometimes it takes a generation, like you, but eventually somebody comes. Tomorrow, or another generation's tomorrow, it's all the same. Blood is blood" (Ng 77). This statement shows that the care and respect for the ancestors and the dead remains long after the traditions of returning the body to China have ended.

Ng's work also shows a new embodiment of the idea of ghosts. Though no literal ghosts appear in the text, the spirit of the dead sister Ona penetrates every character's life and actions. Her specter becomes a silent character in the text, and all the others' actions and emotions have her cloud hanging over them. Ona's death causes a huge rift in the family, and Leila becomes the glue that binds the family together. Leila and everyone else spend a great deal of time and energy trying to understand Ona's suicide: why she jumped, what they could have done to help her, and how they are going to continue in

their lives. Leila states, “I wasn’t ready to say goodbye to Ona. None of us were ready. Ona was dead before we had a chance to save her. We hadn’t had time to catch up. To let go. I know we had to let our memories out” (Ng 129). Their memories become the ghosts that haunt the family, and the memories have not yet faded. Until the family learns to let these memories out, Ona will not be at peace.

Ona remains buried in the United States; she does not need to return to China for her peace. Instead, the peace must come from the memories of her family. Until they learn to accept and deal with her death, she will remain a presence in their lives and will not have the chance to abandon her “ghostlike” state. This situation shows that America has become the site of change regarding the rituals of death. America develops into what Goellnicht describes as a “hybrid state belonging to neither one tradition nor the other, but operating by default somewhere in between” (311). No longer is a transplant to China necessary for the ancestors of Chinese Americans to rest in peace. Ona, because she is of a new generation and because she is American, cannot return to China, having never been there. In fact, “the China the older generation clings to is itself something of a myth, existing only in the memories of the original immigrants” (Goellnicht 321). If the Chinese traditions and China are now only “a myth,” then ghosts could not even find peace if they were to return to that country. For these reasons, Ng seems to assert that Chinese ghosts are things of the past and that Chinese-American ghosts hold an entirely new place in the community, a place distinctive from old Chinese tradition.

These texts trace a movement in the Chinese rituals of death, implying that America is the site of and the reason for these changes. In America, as the decades pass, the ideas of not observing traditional ancestral rites and of not transferring bodies back to China become more and more prevalent. China is no longer the home to which the dead long to return. Death is no longer such a culturally determined affair. The rituals of death fade, but do not completely disappear in America, as the generations of Chinese Americans are further removed from China. Ghosts do not, cannot thrive in America, and so these phenomena take a new form in the power of memory. America, therefore, helps establish new traditions of death and ancestry, which come to define the lives of the people and characters who experience them.

In each of these texts, for each of these themes, a separation between China and America is established, while the idea of Chinese-American identity is advanced. Leila and Jade Snow Wong create identities for themselves that are separate from the first-generation Chinese communities, but not completely split from it. These women find a way to distance themselves from China but not abandon it. They accept their heritage and grow from it, combining their new life in America with the “old life” in China. Similarly, Kingston uses her work to gain an understanding of her ancestry and her past, while showing the possibilities for the future in America. Each text shows the possibilities of education in America: Wong and Ng show how women benefit from the educational possibilities, while Kingston highlights how education in America can help reconnect men with their community. The texts also examine father-daughter relationships, and how important this particular relationship is in determining the

character of a child. America allowed a new envisioning of that relationship, which grants the daughter power over her father and over herself, an idea which would not have been plausible in China. Finally, these texts show the evolution of the idea of ancestry and burial. Each text moves away from the strictness of ancestor worship or the presence of ghosts. This movement away from these ideas allows Chinese-Americans to free themselves from the burden of the past and establish new relationships with their ancestors. The texts seem to argue for a respect of the past without the onerous encumbrance of being subject to it.

None of these authors, however, claim to represent Chinese-American experience for everyone, but rather, they seek to represent a personal Chinese-American experience. They offer different possibilities for negotiating this dual identity and do not negate the possibility of other ways or methods to resolve this internal conflict. Because the texts are so various, they give the reader several glimpses into the Chinese-American community. The reader, therefore, can take these glimpses and slowly begin to create an understanding of the Chinese-American experience.

This understanding can help lead the reader to evaluate his or her own views of America. These stories are not just the story of Chinese-Americans, but rather, these stories reflect the story of most Americans. Our national identity is derived from the many cultures coming together into one nation, and each American has to find a way to reconcile their past and their present identity. Learning about one ethnic minority's struggle to create an identity in the world, should lead to questioning about other American identities. The lessons learned by reading these texts can be applied to other

texts. Readers can realize that most Americans struggle to create their own identity in a nation that is struggling to establish a national identity. The question of what is an American is a question that cannot be easily answered. These works, and the efforts seen in them, depict the quintessential American quest for identity to which every reader may relate.

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