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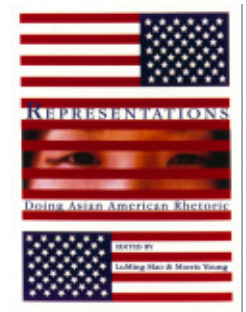
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## ON THE ROAD WITH P. T. BARNUM'S TRAVELING CHINESE MUSEUM

*Rhetorics of Public Reception and Self-Resistance in the  
Emergence of Literature by Chinese American Women*

Mary Louise Buley-Meissner

In 1834, the first Chinese woman arrived in the United States, taking her place almost immediately as the main attraction of a foreign costumes display in the American Museum of New York City. At shows staged for the next three years, crowds gathered simply to watch her sit at a table set for a Chinese tea service, wearing her traditional embroidered gown and hand-stitched slippers. Afong Moy spoke no English, for the Chinese Beauty's foreign tongue added immeasurably to her appeal as "the real thing," a woman as curiously enticing as the porcelain, jade, and tapestries that ornamented her showroom.<sup>1</sup> In 1850, P. T. Barnum's traveling Chinese Museum offered Americans the spectacle of seventeen-year-old Miss Pwan-ye-koo, who soon drew the biggest crowds on Broadway.<sup>2</sup> The *New York Sunday Times* praised her as a true "Chinese lady . . . prepared to exhibit her charming self, her curious retinue, and her fairy feet . . . to an admiring and novelty-loving public" (*Ten Thousand Things* 1850, 206), while the *New York Express* proclaimed that "P. T. Barnum's enterprise stops short of nothing that is strange or wondrous" (205).

Indeed, travelers, missionaries, and diplomats had brought back such splendid tales of China's treasures that "an oriental craze" swept the East Coast from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. Scrolls, rugs, furniture, lacquerware, ivory chopsticks—whatever could be imported, wealthy Americans were pleased to buy.<sup>3</sup> In this experience

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1. Firsthand accounts of Afong Moy's performances are rare; general descriptions can be found in Haddad 1998; Ling 1990; and Moy 1993.
  2. Haddad (1998) points out that P. T. Barnum tried to discredit Afong Moy's earlier appearance in the United States by accusing her of being no more than a peasant, while promoting Miss Pwan-ye-koo as "the first Chinese lady."
  3. Informative books on the history and forms of chinoiserie include *Cathay* 1966;

of the exotic, acquisition of “chinoiserie” (things Chinese) became a mark of upper-class aspirations, leisure culture, and familiarity with a foreign world that very few Americans would ever see for themselves. What could be more gratifying? Only, perhaps, to gaze upon the lovely painted face of an Afong Moy at her tea table or to marvel at a genuine “Chinese lady” whose only desire is your pleasure.

My interest in P. T. Barnum's traveling Chinese Museum comes from teaching at a Midwest public university, where undergraduate students often take one of my Asian American literature courses to fulfill the “cultural diversity” requirement for graduation.<sup>4</sup> Students across majors fill these courses, and most of them have not read any Asian American literature before. Yet nearly all of them arrive with a keen curiosity about (in their words) “Asian ways of life” and “people who are very different than those we get to read about in other English courses.” In teaching Chinese American women writers, I have found that students are likely to be looking for (again in their words) “glimpses of a culture we otherwise wouldn't get the chance to see” and “an experience of venturing into the unknown.” What is the source of such expectations? Many possible reasons could be given, among them the power of popular culture in shaping their reading experience. For as Diana Fuss observes: “There is no ‘natural’ way to read a text: ways of reading are historically specific and culturally variable, and reading positions are always constructed, assigned, or mapped” (1990, 35).

Consider, for example, how the general public has learned to read Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) through reviews of her novel in popular magazines and newspapers (quoted on the book cover or its front pages): “[Tan's] Oriental orientation is an irresistible magnet” (*Publishers Weekly*); “[*The Joy Luck Club* is] snappy as a fortune cookie” (*New York Magazine*); “[This book] is like a Chinese puzzle box—intricate, mysterious” (*Cosmopolitan*); “[Tan offers an] intimate glimpse into a way of life and a culture seldom explored by western literature” (*San Diego Union*); and “[Hers is] an exotic new voice” (*Washington Post*). Even students new to Asian American literature are likely to recognize *The Joy*

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Edwards 2000; and Jacobson 1993.

4. Undergraduates across majors must take a three-credit “cultural diversity” course to meet the General Education Requirements for graduation; the course can be selected from an array of humanities and social science courses dealing with ethnic and/or racial topics.

*Luck Club* as a *New York Times* best seller, a novel compared in the popular press to the finest Chinese porcelain, painting, or tapestry—publicity which I imagine P. T. Barnum would appreciate. Could Tan be unique in prompting this kind of response?

On the contrary, my research on the public reception of Chinese American women writers indicates that reviewers frequently participate in what Edward Said (1978) terms “Orientalism,” particularly when they emphasize the “exoticism” of writers’ perceived cultural origins. The twist on Said, of course, is that “the Other” exists within multicultural American society. In this situation, mainstream reviewers exercise the power through mass-circulation magazines and newspapers to influence not only the marketability of single books, but also public perceptions of how an emerging body of work by “minority” writers contributes (or is marginal) to “majority” literary interests. This is a perspective that I bring to my teaching with the aim of encouraging students to become more aware of how the significance of literary texts and the historical contexts of their reception always are interlinked. As Amy Ling points out: “What is written, what is published, what is read, what makes the best-seller lists, what is forgotten, what is rediscovered, has much to do with the political, social, and emotional climate of the day” (1990, 19). In the rhetoric of public reception, “authenticity” may be valued above artistry—and certainly is assumed to make “genuine” artistry possible.

Here I would like to look at the roots of this rhetoric in turn-of-the-century popular American culture; its manifestation in popular reviews of pathbreaking authors such as Sui Sin Far in the 1900s, Jade Snow Wong in the 1950s, and Maxine Hong Kingston in the 1970s; and its continuing influence in the public reception of contemporary Chinese American women writers. In particular, I am interested in pursuing the possibility that “Orientalism”—in the form of chinoiserie connoisseurship—has maintained its hold on American audiences ever since the *New York Express* in 1850 urged its readers not to miss the “strange and wondrous” performance of an authentic “Chinese lady.” Why, for example, do reviewers today so often describe books authored by Chinese American women as works of Oriental art? What do these reviewers imagine they possess—and assess for the public—when they refer to a novel as “a delicate Chinese brush painting” or to a short story collection as an “exquisite Oriental water color”? From the 1990s to the present, talented Chinese Americans such as Amy Tan, Fae Myenne Ng, Aimee Liu, Sara Chin, Lan Samantha Chang, Christine Chiu, Andrea Louie,

and Mei Ng have been drawing an increasingly wide readership. At the same time, they and their books often are described by reviewers in identical terms, such as “delicate,” “lyrical,” “mysterious,” and “enchanting.” Are these the ideal qualities of authors who provide the exotic experience that reviewers continue to seek? By looking back to the early twentieth century, I believe we can begin to trace out possible answers.

In this essay, I also investigate how Chinese American women writers have developed rhetorics of self-resistance to counter public displacement and diminishment of their achievements. By rhetorics, here I mean strategies of authorship that intentionally enact (whether implicitly or explicitly) the roles and responsibilities that they are committed to fulfilling in their work, including distinctly individualized, persuasive appeals (thematic and stylistic) for reader engagement with that commitment. Although this insistence on self-determination generally has been overlooked in the popular press, women writers consistently have exercised their right to speak in their own voices—in deliberately chosen and carefully crafted literary forms—about the social and cultural realities of their lives and times. As Kenneth Burke points out, “the range of rhetoric” (1969, 20) extends far beyond argumentation to complex processes of identity formation and reformation that take place not only individually, but also socially and culturally. Moreover, acts of reading and writing become meaningful within a “wider context of motives” (31) that is rhetorically mediated through the symbolic use of language, a Burkean understanding of discourse that has proven useful across academic disciplines. (See, for example, Crusius 1999; Stob 2005; and Wess 1996.) Chinese American women writers, in my view, employ rhetorics of the self in active resistance to others’ attempts to deny their individuality, their artistry, and their shared commitment to truthful storytelling.

In the rhetoric of public reception, their work has been decontextualized, regarded as politically and historically innocent. This has enabled reviewers to inscribe their own intentions on writers’ texts—to assume, for example, that nothing would please writers more than to gain approval and acceptance from the dominant culture, to be assimilated into already familiar ways of knowing and being. Rarely do reviews admit the possibility that writers such as Jade Snow Wong and Maxine Hong Kingston could be challenging readers through cultural critique, particularly through investigations of identity and difference that resist rather than reaffirm Orientalist stereotypes. However, I am convinced that Chinese American women writers have achieved their

own authority in articulating complex bicultural realities. As Lisa Lowe (1991) points out, “The making of Chinese-American culture—how ethnicity is imagined, practiced, continued—is worked out as much between ourselves and our communities as it is transmuted from one generation to another” (27). Across generations, women writers are not politically or historically innocent, but acutely aware of social conditions influencing response to their interpretations of identity, difference, and community. In the 1900s, for example, journalist and short story writer Sui Sin Far clearly understood what the popular press expected of her: “They tell me that if I wish to succeed in literature in America I should dress in Chinese costume, carry a fan in my hand, wear a pair of scarlet beaded slippers . . . and come of high birth” (1995, 230). She knew that a “Chinese lady”—like Pwan-ye-koo of the Barnum exhibition—was what the public expected her to be, and still she chose to identify herself as “Eurasian” (the daughter of a Chinese mother and English father) and to ally herself with the working poor of Chinatown, whose stories no one else would tell. Looking back at that time, I realize how eagerness for the exotic has persisted in popular culture, a fascination heightened at the turn of the twentieth century by popular fiction and the press.

On the one hand, Chinese people were widely despised, as epitomized by the Chinese Exclusion Acts of 1882 and 1892.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, in the early 1900s, “the oriental craze”—the American fascination with cultural curios—extended to a popular craving for Chinatown pulp fiction and revelations of what Chinese people were “really like.” Thus, it would not be unusual for a popular magazine such as *Collier’s* to publish all of the following in one issue: an editorial calling for the expulsion of Chinese from the West Coast; an excerpt from the latest Chinatown thriller, complete with opium-smoking villains; a review of Chinatown restaurants; and ads for “oriental” products such as tea, perfume, and face powder. Researching this phenomenon, Rachel Lee (1997) observes: “Clearly, magazines felt no sense of incongruity in circulating ads that promoted desire for a commodified Asiatic body yet printing [stories] and editorials that voiced loathing for Asian peoples” (254). In effect, commodification became containment: the exotic was domesticated, the foreign was made familiar, and any threat posed by “the yellow peril” was abated.

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5. Immigration legislation targeting Chinese Americans is addressed in Chan 1991; Lai, Lim, and Yung 1990; Okihiro 2005; and Palumbo-Liu 1999.

One writer in the early twentieth century did venture to describe Chinese immigrants in very different terms. From 1896 to 1912, journalist Sui Sin Far interviewed Chinatown residents in Seattle, San Francisco, and other U.S. cities to understand their lives “from the inside” (see, for example, Far 1898, 1903, and 1909). Moreover, in 1912 she published the first major work of fiction by an Asian American, the short story collection *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* (see Bo Wang’s extensive treatment of Sui Sin Far’s achievements in the next chapter). What I would like to underscore is how reviews of *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* at the time of its publication consistently emphasize her success (or failure) in explaining Chinese to Caucasians. For example, the *New York Times* (“A New Note” 1912) comments: “The thing she has tried to do is to portray for readers of the white race the lives, feelings, sentiments of the Americanized Chinese. . . . It is a task whose adequate doing would require well-nigh superhuman insight and the subtlest of methods.” Because “these unusual and exquisite stories . . . open an entirely new world for many readers” (McClurg 1912), Sui Sin Far must prove herself to be a trustworthy guide. Similarly, the *Boston Daily Globe* (“Book Reaches the Heart” 1912) surmises that Sui Sin Far’s stories must be translations of Chinese into English (rather than original works in English) because otherwise it would not be possible for her to present the “delicate sensibilities” of Chinese people, including those “who have come, dazed, into the ways of a western civilization.”

The reductive rhetoric of public reception surely contributed to the displacement of Sui Sin Far from American literary history; in fact, not until the 1980s did scholarly consideration of her importance begin, mainly undertaken by Sol Solberg (1981, 1982), Amy Ling (1983, 1990), Annette White-Parks (1995).<sup>6</sup> Yet, Sui Sin Far’s legacy of self-resistance endures to the present day through her efforts to develop a counter-rhetoric, a transgressive rhetoric of the self that is both personal and political as it calls into question the entire popular enterprise of essentializing Chinese identity. In her autobiographical essays, for example, she claims neither a yellow nor a white identity, but instead asks readers why such a high price must be paid for insisting on individuality: “I give my right hand to the Occidentals and my left to the Orientals, hoping that between them they will not utterly destroy the insignificant ‘connecting link’” (1995, 230). Moreover, as a short story writer, she creates Chinese characters who are complicated, unpredictable, and indelibly

6. Critical commentary on Sui Sin Far’s work also includes Ammons 1991; Ferens 2002; Lee 1997; Leonard 2001; and Ling and White-Parks 1995.

individual, such as a young woman who chooses deportation to China over exile in the United States (“Tian Shan’s Kindred Spirit”); a prostitute who does not want to be freed from the life she has chosen for herself (“Lin John”); a factory worker who can escape slavery only by dying with her child (“The Prize China Baby”); and a mother who ends her son’s life rather than lose his spirit (“The Wisdom of the New”). In clearing a path for the emergence of Chinese American women writers, Sui Sin Far truly is a pioneer.

In contrast to Sui Sin Far, who was for many years effaced in misreadings of her work, Jade Snow Wong won immediate, widespread acclaim in 1950 with the publication of her autobiography, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*. The first Chinese American author to win a large readership, she tells the story of her life from 1922 to 1945 in and out of San Francisco’s Chinatown, where her parents immigrated in the early 1900s. They believe that a woman’s place in life is to serve her family: to obey her father, yield to her husband, and provide for her sons. When Wong insists on following a different path in life, she is forced to leave home. She moves out at age fifteen, supports herself by working as a housekeeper, and earns a college scholarship. When she tries to tell her parents that she is an individual as well as a Chinese daughter, her father admonishes her: “You are shameless. Your skin is yellow. Your features are forever Chinese. . . . Do not try to force foreign ideas into my house” (1999, 130). Nonetheless, she graduates from college at the top of her class, starts her own pottery business, and vows to become a successful writer. At last, even her father must acknowledge her achievements. As he explains to her: “You do not realize the shameful and degraded position into which 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” (246). Finally Wong is again welcome in her family, where she resumes the role of obedient daughter while leading an independent professional life.

Reviews of *Fifth Chinese Daughter* upon its initial publication were overwhelmingly positive, emphasizing the inspiring example set by the author in bridging two cultures. Translated and reprinted in nine countries, the book made her famous, but in what terms? In “The Colorful Home Life of a Chinese Girl,” a *Chicago Sunday Tribune* review (Judson 1950), the book is admired for being “like a piece of Chinese brocade—gay, colorful, charming, but woven with a strength that gives it



lasting quality” (5). The reviewer also is pleased to find “in easy reading form . . . a true picture of contrasting cultures”; best of all, she discovers “an understandable recipe for ‘sweet sour,’ my favorite Chinese dish” (5). In the rhetoric of public reception, Wong is cast as a quintessentially Asian female, graciously welcoming her Caucasian readers into her exotic world. Reviews from the *New York Times* to *Commonweal* describe her as if she is a hostess, a tour guide, a goodwill ambassador. For example, she is praised for “[a] glow of being at once Richer by Asia, and Richer by the West . . . warm[ing] those with whom [she shares] her experiences” (Evans 1950), while her book is admired because “[it] exudes the delicate femininity only the Asiatic women possess” (Geary 1950).

Completely overlooked in such reviews is the pain that she feels in leaving her family and the deep disequilibrium that she experiences in becoming an American success. Likewise, her self-determination and liberation from an oppressive, traditional Chinese culture are emphasized, but nowhere do reviewers acknowledge the harsh realities of Chinatown life in the United States when she was growing up and coming of age, including poverty, substandard housing, segregated schooling, high suicide rates, alcoholism, sweatshops, and dead-end jobs even for college graduates. Wong does not directly address these issues, but they strongly color her writing, as shown by childhood talks with her maternal grandmother, who warns that society “discard[s] the weak ones” (1999, 32). To survive, Wong is told that she “must study [her] books very hard” (36), intensifying her drive to succeed.

In this context, Wong’s rhetoric of the self in *Fifth Chinese Daughter* can be read as both politically imperative and socially incisive. In effect, her autobiography is a declaration that second-generation Chinese Americans and their families—who were doing their best to be self-sufficient in very limited circumstances—should not be denied the rights accorded other citizens. That these rights were held only tenuously by Asian Americans was everywhere evident with the outbreak of World War II. *Time* magazine (1941), for example, reassured readers in “How to Tell Your Friends from the Japs” that the typical “Chinese expression” was “placid, kindly, open,” in contrast to the “dogmatic, arrogant” look of the Japanese; also marking the Chinese were “an easy gait and sometimes a shuffle,” while Japanese had a walk “stiffly erect, hard heeled.” *Life* (1941) similarly reported in “How to Tell Japs from the Chinese” that Chinese people have a “parchment yellow complexion” and a “longer, narrower face,” as compared to the

Japanese “earthy yellow” and “broader, shorter face” (81–82). In a public service comic strip featuring the American hero Captain Terry, *Life* (1943) informed readers that Chinese eyes “are set like any European’s or American’s—but have a marked squint” and that “the Chinese smile easily,” unlike Japanese, with their more obviously slanted eyes and generally suspicious appearance.

Confronted with this kind of racism in everyday life, Wong develops a rhetoric of self-resistance by deliberately constructing alternative portraits of what makes people individuals as well as responsible citizens. Her mother working sixteen hours a day on bound feet, her father exhausting himself in service to their community, neighbors helping each other in hard times, even “outsiders” becoming friends with her family—all of these people and many more are portrayed with respect and compassion. Indeed, from her family Wong derives the strength of character to prove *Time* and *Life* wrong in their assessments of human nature. “It is good to have you home again!” (1999, 246) are the most welcome words she hears in her life, spoken by her parents, whose own examples have helped her to see—and to insist to her readers—that “the great people of any race” (173) are those who know their own self-worth and honor that of others.

In the emergence of Chinese American women’s writing, Wong’s lasting achievement is to craft a public voice to tell a story long excluded from American literary history. Inseparable from that voice is a rhetoric of self-resistance that draws readers into a complex, conflicted story of attempting to achieve an integrated bicultural identity in a society where doing so could be a very lonely enterprise. Acutely aware that her success is so highly acclaimed because it is so unusual, Wong tells readers in the final chapter of her autobiography that she has become “a wonder in the eyes of the western world” (1999, 244) and a strange creature to the people of Chinatown. In fact, “Chinese and Americans alike acted as if they thought she were deaf or dumb or couldn’t understand their language” (245) while watching her work at her pottery wheel. As Wong attempts to bridge cultures, she clearly shows that doing so exacts a high personal cost.

Ironically, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* is now criticized for the same qualities that reviewers praised in the 1950s, particularly its apparent subscription to a “model minority” view of American success.<sup>7</sup> As Leslie Bow

7. Takaki (1998) indicates that San Francisco’s Chinatown in 1940—five blocks by four blocks in total area—held fifteen thousand Chinese, who lived mostly in sub-

puts it, "The opposition between what is Chinese and what is American is bridged through a blend of Christian ethics and Chinese American capitalism" (1993, 165). Chin et al. (1974) have gone so far as to dismiss *Fifth Chinese Daughter* as nothing more than assimilationist "propaganda" (xx). The reality that naturalized citizenship was not granted to Chinese Americans until 1943 (and to Japanese Americans in 1952) may suggest the limitations of an assimilationist assessment of the book. Acting to "correct a historic mistake," President Roosevelt repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943. However, with the onset of the Korean War, the Chinese became the enemy, and in 1950, Congress passed the McCarran Internal Security Act, authorizing detention of anyone suspected of, or likely to engage in, subversive activities. Could what happened to Japanese Americans during World War II have happened to Chinese Americans during the Cold War? As Wong's rhetoric of self-resistance underscores, Chinatowns and internment camps are no further apart than the laws justifying their existence.<sup>8</sup>

Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, first published in 1976, has made her the most famous and controversial author of Chinese American literature. She has received countless awards and has been named a Living Treasure of Hawaii. In the 1980s, *The Woman Warrior* was one of the most frequently assigned books on college campuses nationwide. However, the "authenticity" of Kingston's work frequently has been called into question, most infamously by Frank Chin (1991), who has accused her of producing nothing except "fake work" for readers who know nothing about "real" Chinese traditions, history, and culture (3). Indeed, concerns about authenticity are pervasive in scholarship on Asian American literature. For example, Mingshui Cai (1995) goes so far as to insist, "Cultural authenticity is the basic criterion for evaluating multicultural literature" (3). Moreover, the authority to claim an "insider" perspective, in Cai's view, depends on clearly recognizable, "culturally specific ways of living, believing and behaving" (5). In contrast, John Hutnyk (2000) asserts that "there is no need to posit a fixed and authenticated Asian 'Culture' as the benchmark for critique"

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standard housing and had a tuberculosis rate three times that of the general city population.

8. Literary criticism of *Fifth Chinese Daughter* also includes Blinde 1979; Kim 1982; Lim 1992; Ling 1990; and Yin and Paulson 1982. Tributes to Wong as a potter and enamelist as well as a writer are included in Kingston et al. 2002.

(39) in postmodern analyses of ethnic, national, and global identities. In the middle of this critical spectrum, Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (1993a) cautions literary scholars to recognize the limited applicability of “culturalism,” which she defines as the “tendency to exaggerate exoticism and the determining role of culture in Asian American life, allowing a facile concept of cultural difference to arrest inquiry into the complexities of the Other, and thus inadvertently perpetuating Otherness” (117). Debates on the meaning and significance of “authenticity” in Asian American literature include influential essays by Cheung (1990), Chin (1991), Lim (1993), Ling (1987), and Lowe (1991).

During the past thirty years, most sharply contested has been Kingston’s authority to tell her own story. In the rhetoric of public reception, Chinese American women writers still are expected to take the stage and display their desire to please one and all in the audience. Nevertheless, much like Sui Sin Far at the turn of the century and Jade Snow Wong in the 1950s, Kingston defiantly claims a place at the center of American literary history. Through a speculative, richly imaginative rhetoric of the self, she also speaks for Chinese American women writers today, who refuse to be silenced or suppressed by others’ expectations of their cultural roles. *The Woman Warrior* describes her California childhood in the 1940s and 1950s, when her immigrant parents struggled to support six children through their laundry business and their sheer will to survive. Incorporating biography, myth, legend, folklore, and fantasy, the book presents the main character, Maxine, trying to understand her bicultural heritage. Most of all, she wants to invent an identity and develop a voice that will enable her to speak out against injustice—including racism and sexism—wherever she encounters it. At times, her mother, Brave Orchid, seems to oppose her, insinuating that girls are worthless, fit to be slaves, and complaining that “stupidity . . . comes from reading too much” (1977, 194). Yet at other times, Brave Orchid inspires Maxine with stories of courageous woman warriors who have stormed across China to avenge their families’ honor. For many years, their relationship is marked by misunderstanding, bitterness, pain, and confusion. Finally, however, they are able to “talk story” together, their voices bringing to life the hopes and fears of women across generations.

Kingston has said that in *The Woman Warrior* she deliberately tried not to play into popular images of China as mysterious and Chinese people as inscrutable (Kingston 1982, 55). However, most of the book’s early reviews praised it in exactly such terms, highlighting its “exotic”

qualities. In fact, Kingston's work in 1976 was subjected to the same Orientalist attitudes as Sui Sin Far's had been in 1912. For example, a review of *The Woman Warrior* in *Publishers Weekly* points out, "Rarely does East meet West with such charming results . . . [with] Oriental myth and Occidental reality somehow blended." Moreover, the book is praised for being "as rich and varied as Chinese brocade" and for "prose that often achieves the delicacy and precision of porcelain. An unusual and rewarding book for a specially attuned audience." Why, again, is it assumed that it requires extraordinary insight to understand Chinese American lives? Why is such a talented artist as Kingston reduced to playing the part of cultural emissary or entrepreneur?

Part of the answer is that from 1949 to 1972, China had been largely closed to westerners, a period when images of the Yellow Peril and the Red Threat coalesced in American international policy and public opinion. When *The Woman Warrior* appeared—only four years after President Nixon's historic meeting with Mao Tse-tung and Zhou Enlai—readers were eager to rediscover the China of Cathay, the timeless land of their dreams. Reporting on China in the popular press at that time included travelogues of its "changeless" beauty next to critiques of its political system. Thus, through *The Woman Warrior*, readers may have hoped to glimpse what China and the Chinese were "really like," regardless of the Cultural Revolution and other social upheavals. As reviewers readily admitted, the "inscrutably foreign, oriental" life of others certainly was an attraction (Manning 1982).

Popular reviews of *The Woman Warrior* in the 1970s and the 1980s rarely mentioned its insightful depictions of U.S. social inequities. However, in a rhetoric of self-resistance deploying a voice empowered by a compelling social conscience, Kingston turns her readers' attention again and again to the painful reality of a country divided by fear, ignorance, and poverty. As she makes vividly clear throughout *The Woman Warrior*, she abhors the racism of modern America as much as she opposes the sexism of feudal China. For example, when Maxine's boss at an art supply store tells her to order "nigger yellow" paint, she refuses and loses her job. In the ghetto, she has seen corpses "rolled and dumped, sad little dirty bodies covered with a police khaki blanket" (1977, 51). When an Asian neighbor is stabbed and the police find Japanese words pinned to his clothes, her father is quick to tell them, "No read Japanese. . . . Me Chinese" (52). In Kingston's rhetoric of self-resistance, however, it is impossible to escape racism through such distinctions. When Maxine imagines herself as the

female avenger Fa Mu Lan (a legendary warrior), “the words at her back” (carved into her skin) forever remind her to oppose tyranny. “‘Chink’ words and ‘gook’ words too” (53) drive her to defend her sisters and brothers, who could be anyone deprived of their dignity.

Continuing debates over Kingston’s writing have centered on whether or not she authentically, accurately documents Chinese culture. In the rhetoric of public reception from the 1970s until now, her artistry often has seemed incidental. Yet Kingston herself has defied attempts to categorize her writing by race or ethnicity. Her concerns are first and foremost those of an artist. As “an American writer” of “an American book” (1982, 57–58), she asks: “Why should I be denied an individual artistic vision? . . . Readers can see the variety of ways for Chinese Americans to be” (63). When Kingston published *The Woman Warrior*, the Immigration Act of 1965 had been in effect for ten years, finally abolishing national-origin quotas. During the 1960s and 1970s, the United States also was transformed by civil rights protests, women’s liberation movements, and antiwar demonstrations. In 1968, at San Francisco State College, the Third World Liberation Front (a multicultural student coalition) led a four-month strike that helped to bring about the first ethnic studies program in the country. In its own way, Kingston’s writing bears witness to the powerful force of the human voice in effecting social change. As she has said, *The Woman Warrior* is “a world book” whose interpretation calls for recognition of its “many layers, as human beings have many layers” (65).<sup>9</sup>

When *The Joy Luck Club* was published in 1989, Orville Schell in the *New York Times Book Review*, like many other reviewers, accentuated generational conflicts in Tan’s novel, paralleling mother vs. daughter and Chinese vs. American understanding of concepts such as family responsibility and personal freedom. However, the cachet of connoisseurship belonged to Schell in particular because he could parlay his reputation as a well-seasoned “China hand” into redoubtable credentials as a literary critic. Accordingly, his readership was prepared to accept as authoritative his assertion that Tan’s novel was to be especially prized for its “recherches to old China . . . so beautifully written that one should just allow oneself to be borne along as if in a dream” (1989, 3). Is this possibly the dream of “Cathay,” the vision of a China endlessly appealing to

9. Among many informative studies of Kingston are Cheung 1993; Skandera-Trombley 1998; Wong 1992, 1993b, 1999; and Yu 2001.

westerners in its changeless beauty and wisdom? In the early nineteenth century, as John Haddad (1998) describes it, "Cathay" in its myriad imagined forms became "an idealized conception . . . that took the place of actual knowledge of China's country and people," so "mysterious and charming" that "porcelain painters" were admired as its "most reliable topographers." Similarly in the popular press of the twentieth century, Chinese American women writers such as Tan are praised as artisans of Orientalism, providing a discerning public with glimpses of a land and people that "foreign experts" such as Schell know best.

Critical studies of Tan during the past fifteen years indicate that she, too, is a controversial figure in the emergence of Chinese American women's writing. Garrett Hongo (1995), noting that ethnic writers are expected to fulfill a wide range of responsibilities—to their art and craft, to their ethnic communities, to their readers at large, to their societies, to the development of literary traditions—advises against assuming that "ethnic topics, ethnic identities, and the literary portrayal of ethnic voices" should be "the *exclusive cultural properties* of a group that would somehow be deemed 'authentic,' licensed with the cultural 'right' to represent itself as the *ethnic Other*" (31; emphasis in the original). Yet criticism of Tan's writing frequently has taken exactly that form, as when Sheng-mei Ma (2000) claims that "someone like Tan whose cultural arsenal . . . is circumscribed by her American identity . . . is bound to duplicate Orientalist practices as often as she repudiates them" (110). Similarly, Cai (1995) argues that "cultural authenticity" is the most important literary standard to uphold because none of us should "overestimate the power of imagination to close cultural gaps" (3).

For Tan, however, imagination explores what cannot be explicated, illuminating identity as a process of discovery rather than as an authentic or inauthentic state of being. Accordingly, Tan's rhetoric of the self in *The Joy Luck Club* is double-edged, an assertion of authorship that breaks down popular stereotypes of how she should perform for the public. On the one hand, she draws readers into her fictional world by making surface appearances alluring; sensory details, for example, abound in nearly every scene. On the other hand, once she has brought readers close enough to think they know what is happening, Tan turns the tables on them; appearances prove to be deceiving, or at least to be only the first of many layers of possible significance. Chinoiserie connoisseurs among book reviewers seem to have delighted in referring to her writing as a display of oriental treasures. However, Tan's rhetoric of

self-resistance in *The Joy Luck Club* warrants a different kind of appreciation for her presentation of stories within stories exploring the complex history of her characters' emotional, social, and cultural lives.

One of the most memorable characters is Ying-Ying, a woman who has lost and is trying to recover herself in a world that seems at every turn to tell her that her efforts are hopeless. How she gains the inner strength to save her daughter from the same fate is dramatized by Tan through compelling scenes of lifelong confrontations with challenging moral questions. One of the most intriguing of these confrontations comes when, at only five years old, she happens upon the hired help preparing a banquet for her family on a pleasure boat: "I stayed as if caught in a good dream. . . . I watched as she took out a sharp, thin knife and began to slice open the fish bellies, pulling out the red slippery insides and throwing them over her shoulder into the lake. I saw her scrape off the fish scales, which flew into the air like shards of glass. And then there were two chickens that no longer gurgled after their heads were cut off. And a big snapping turtle that stretched out its neck to bite a stick and—whuck!—off fell its head. And dark masses of thin freshwater eels, swimming furiously in a pot. And then the woman carried everything, without a word, into the kitchen. And there was nothing left to see" (1989, 75)

The violence of this scene erupts through a day on which Ying-Ying has been expected to take her place as an obedient, well-trained daughter of the upper class. Standing in her elegant, handmade clothing, she is splattered with blood, a picture sharply contrasting any orientalist fantasies of delicate, feminine sensibility. Moreover, in an attempt to hide herself from her anxious amah, Ying-Ying reaches into the "crimson red" of the turtle's blood to smear it on her silk and satin brocade, an outfit meant to mark her as a daughter of a first wife rather than of a concubine. However, Tan presents the possibility that it is the blood that sets Ying-Ying apart, for many others suffer to provide what her family takes for granted. In the same chapter, as the family pursues its privileged pleasures, their rickshaw drivers are described as "soaked with sweat . . . their mouths . . . open and panting like horses" (1989, 72), while peasant families are no more real to Ying-Ying than "poor-looking people" (73) without faces or feelings. Ironically, Ying-Ying's own amah, who daily meets her every demand, is part of this lower class, for she is a widow who has given up her only son to become a servant. When Ying-Ying falls off the boat, fishermen rescue her and row her around



the lake, calling out to rich people on barges to see who will claim her, but no one does:

“Have you lost a little girl, a girl who fell in the water?”

There were . . . shouts from the floating pavilion, and I strained to see the faces of Amah, Baba, Mama. . . . A little girl pushed her way through some legs.

“That’s not me!” she cried. “I’m here. I didn’t fall in the water.” The people in the boat roared with laughter and turned away. (79)

Hearing this reaction, realizing she is completely alone for the first time in her life, Ying-Ying is terrified at the prospect of being “lost forever,” turned into a beggar girl with no one ever to care for her again. Consistent with Tan’s authorial rhetoric of the self, the reality of the world outside Ying-Ying’s gated compound comes to her—and the novel’s readers—not as an orientalist dream of pagodas and pavilions, but as sudden, self-shattering knowledge of how precarious identities can be. This theme continues throughout the novel as Ying-Ying marries and leaves an abusive husband, exiles herself to the countryside for ten years, survives the mean streets of Shanghai, and comes to the United States as a displaced person with a new husband who cannot speak Chinese, but who does not hesitate to change her name on her immigration papers. Relentlessly, the shadow of the lost girl pursues Ying-Ying, never letting her forget that no one knows who Ying-Ying is inside her roles as wife, mother, and outcast, whether in China or the United States. After the loss of two children, Ying-Ying nearly despairs of being found by anyone, but finally, in her daughter Lena’s face, she sees their shared longing to speak out without fear of the world’s retribution. “I must tell her everything” (1989, 274) are words which set Ying-Ying free to welcome back the “dark shadow” that has held her inner truths for so many years.

While Tan’s work has been orientalized by the popular press and deauthenticated by some literary critics, she has cut through that double bind with a double-edged rhetoric of self-resistance. In my view, this is why her contribution to Chinese American women’s writing is significant. As Wendy Ho emphasizes, “Chinese exotica” is not the focus of *The Joy Luck Club*; accordingly, “As teachers, we need to seek out new and empowering interpretive strategies for reading [Tan] rather than appropriating . . . ways of reading our emerging writers that are based on racist, sexist stereotypes” (1996, 327). Insisting that the meaning of any story is the whole story, Tan’s work values above all else language

itself as potentially radically transformative of our perspectives on identity, society, the entire world created by human relationships.<sup>10</sup>

An interesting turn away from orientalist public reception of Chinese American women's writing can be seen in response to the novel *Bone* (1993) by Fae Myenne Ng, whose literary skills have persuaded critics that she has as much in common with canonical authors such as F. Scott Fitzgerald as she does with other emerging talents in multicultural literature. Reviewers sometimes have pictured Ng (who is second-generation Chinese American) as an "Asian woman" crossing East-West divides (Stephenson 1994), or they have overlooked her San Francisco setting in search of an "ancient" China hidden beneath the modern city (Pintarich 1993). Sometimes, too, reviewers admit that they enjoy the book because in it they find "an exciting insider tour of Chinatown" (Johnson 1993), regardless of the book's clear message that tourists never know who lives there. More often, however, she has been acclaimed as a singularly gifted writer whose characters—mother, father, three daughters—become so real that their voices call out to readers long after the last page. In my view, Ng's literary achievement is made possible by a uniquely creative rhetoric of the self that finds identity in absence as much as presence. Much of her story concerns the family's response to the suicide of the middle daughter, Ona, whose reasons for leaving them are never made completely clear. Trying to bring Ona's heart into their home again, her parents and sisters realize that bloodlines are not necessarily the way to trace the truth of family connections. Instead, they see that history—recovered, revised, remembered and lived together—becomes their source of individual and collective identity. All of them have suffered, too much to bear alone, and so they cannot turn away from what hurts: how the father, Leon, arrived as a "paper son" at Angel Island, labored a lifetime for less than minimum wages, and was betrayed in a business deal by his best friend; how the mother, Dulcie, found her own American dreams dissolve into the despair of raising a family in insurmountable poverty; how the daughters sought escape from their parents' anger and shame at being denied the chance to do better. Learning to listen to each other, however, is such a painful experience that for much of the book, "the ghost, the guilt" of Ona's absence becomes a potent symbol of a "too dark" place (15), where they are afraid the failure of the family resides.

10. Scholarship on Tan is increasing, including Bloom 2000; Bow 2001; Ho 1999; Huntley 1998; Wong 1996; and Yuan 1999.

In the emergence of Chinese American women's writing, one of Ng's most important contributions is a rhetoric of authorial self-resistance that engages readers in experiencing the impossibility of anyone fully interpreting a language, a culture—or indeed an individual human being—for another. This is shown most clearly through *Bone's* narrator, Leila, the oldest daughter, who becomes physically and emotionally exhausted from “dealing with death in two languages” (1993, 15). A teacher-parent liaison at a Chinatown school named Edith Eaton (Sui Sin Far's English name), Leila finds that both at work and at home, “I have a whole different vocabulary of feeling in English than in Chinese, and not everything can be translated” (18). After Ona's death, Leila takes her place in the middle between the parents and their younger daughter, Nina, who has moved from California to New York, giving up guilt for anonymity. Attempting to retrieve the memories and honor the sacrifices that can keep her family together, Leila searches for the lost bones of Grandpa Leong, who claimed Leon as his son at Angel Island. As a community elder tells her: “Sometimes it takes a generation, like you, but eventually somebody comes. Tomorrow, or another generation's tomorrow. . . . Blood is blood” (77). However, Leila is a “paper daughter” of a “paper son,” Leon's child by marriage, not birth. (Leila's biological father has nothing to do with her or Dulcie for most of her life.) For Leila—and for Ng—“Family exists only because somebody has a story, and knowing the story connects us to a history” (36). Moreover, because “One truth open[s] another” (19), a single language or a single viewpoint can never achieve the “completion” (105) of identity, family, or community. As Ng underscores, survival depends upon being able “to *get long* . . . to make do . . . [to have] a long view, which [is] endurance, and a long heart, which [is] hope” (176)—all of which are made possible by listening to many voices, past and present, which speak in Chinese, English, and as many other languages as there are dreams.

Early reviews suggest that Ng's themes and narrative style elude any easily available categories of chinoiserie collection. Michiko Kakutani (1993), for example, notes in the *New York Times* that *Bone* is an “incantatory first novel . . . [Ng] is blessed with a poet's gift for metaphor and a reporter's eye for detail”; while Michael Upchurch (1993) in the *Seattle Times/Post-Intelligencer* calls the novel “[b]rutal and poignant, dreamy and gritty, specific to its place and resonant in its implications about what it means to be an American.” Established writers of the time clearly

welcome her work, as seen in these book cover endorsements: “*Bone* is the result of many years of hard work and experience. It is tough and real . . . , mark[ing] the debut of a writer whose literary skills are fantastic” (Ishmael Reed); “Ng is tough and smart, unflinching in her portrait of two generations, Chinese and Chinese-American. . . . There’s a sense of history that can’t be escaped by will or wit or wish” (Rosellen Brown); and “[*Bone* is] full of feeling and the sound of the streets . . . sensitive and truthful . . . there is no doubt that a new voice has come into American letters” (Frank MacShane).

Clearly, *Bone* is being read as an American book by an American writer from the onset, definitely a different kind of reception than Kingston received years before. Equally important, Ng is being respected for contributing to American literary heritage in ways transcending nationalized definitions of literary merit. As Ho (1999) asserts, Ng composes “not Chinese stories . . . but *Chinese American* and *Asian American* stories, which are in the process of being lived, contested, and constructed in the flux of U.S. culture and society” (211; emphasis in the original). Moreover, as Lowe (1991) notes, Ng is not trying to “represent an essential authenticity” (125) that she can explain through her characters. Instead, I recognize that Ng deliberately deploys an authorial rhetoric of the self that draws readers’ attention to what precedes and exceeds representation. In the emergence of Chinese American women writers, Ng stands out for integrating a minimalist prose style with a deeply compassionate portrayal of intensely individual people, whose search for home and history parallels Ng’s own commitment to the art of storytelling itself. In the language of emotion—fear, rage, guilt, love, desire—Leila and her family find release from trying to express everything in words. Then, out of the depths of their feeling for each other, they shape an understanding of belonging together that will allow them to live again with hope after Ona’s death. As Leila affirms at the end of *Bone*, “even the unspoken between us is a measure of our everyday promise to the living and to the dead. All of our promises, like all of our hopes, move us through life with the power of an ocean liner pushing through the sea” (1993, 193). Rather than crossing the Pacific from China to America with tales of the fantastic and faraway, Ng—like Kafka—takes an ax to the “frozen sea” within us all.<sup>11</sup>

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11. Other literary criticism on Ng includes Gonzalez 1996; Huang 2003; Kafka 1997; Sze 1994; and Yen 2000.

Ng deserves recognition for opening more literary and cultural space for other writers to be seen for their own accomplishments. Orientalist tendencies, however, are still evident in contemporary reception of Chinese American women writers' fiction. For example, in a review of Sara Chin's short story collection, *Below the Line* (1997), she is praised for "poetically draw[ing] aside the literary bamboo curtain on a culture too often silenced by its own stoicism" (Beck 1998). Potential readers also are told that they will directly experience "China and the Chinese" through her writing, "staring straight into the heart of an ancient culture," as if Chin is a trustworthy travel guide in a foreign land. Praised for their "Chinese-Cantonese flavor" (Quan 1997, 78), Chin's stories actually are set mainly in the United States, not China, and their narrative viewpoint is fixed firmly in modern urban life. A father is lost on the DC beltway, driving in endless circles, until realizing that no one else can find the way home. Watching American television to learn English, a mother becomes fascinated by the power of violence, onscreen and off. Growing up "where there were no Chinatowns" (Chin 1997, 126), a sister and a brother share an unspoken lifetime bond: "What holds us together, different as we are, is that we have survived the same metaphors . . . commies, pinkos, japs, and every now and then they got it right: chink" (127). An audio technician and sound designer for documentary films, Chin is a well-practiced listener—an artist attuned to emotions and events occurring "below the line," that is, outside the range of what dominant culture tends to value. Through her stories, readers have the opportunity to hear "the past percolat[ing] up" (55) through the buried lives and broken dreams of immigrant Americans. Across generations, Chin also carefully attends to silences underlying fears and desires, including the wariness of Asian Americans who are all too familiar with the relentless risk of being "caught on the wrong side of a word" (128). Resisting expectations that she assume the role of multimedia cultural entrepreneur, Chin instead shows that both "China" and "America" are complex categorizations of experience, each holding concepts of history, society, and culture that are individually as well as collectively defined. As one of her narrators, a young Chinese American woman visiting China for the first time, puts it: "I love the low ground, the things that people pushed offstage. . . . the heart, the trashy heart of my own history. After all, wasn't that where the unknown leaped out at you?" (57).<sup>12</sup>

12. Critical commentary on *Below the Line* includes Cokal 1998 and Fachinger 2005.

In the mid-nineteenth century, P. T. Barnum dreamed of acquiring Nathan Dunn's "Ten Thousand Things on China and the Chinese," a collection and exhibition including not only fifty-three glass cases of oriental treasures, but also over three hundred paintings of China and fifty life-size statues of Chinese people (Haddad 1998). Invited to the opening reception was "a goodly representation from all the learned professions" (including the "literati"), whose enthusiastic response helped to generate astounding public interest (Wines 1839, 10). From 1838 to 1841, fifty thousand copies of the 120-page catalogue were sold as hundreds of thousands of people from across the city and state (and other parts of the country) made their way to a display and documentation of oriental lifeways so amazing that, as advertisements promised, they would gain more pleasure from the experience than any actual visit to China could provide. Finally acquiring the lease for a road show in 1850, Barnum knew what was needed to make his traveling Chinese Museum complete: he "secured and attached to [the collection] . . . the celebrated Chinese Beauty, Miss Pwan-ye-koo, and her suite" (*Ten Thousand Things* 1850, 6).<sup>13</sup> As he proclaimed, "it is a pleasure for people of taste to be associated with" such an educational enterprise (204). Thus, everyone who entered the Chinese Museum could leave a chinoiserie connoisseur.

Are Chinese American women writers still valued more for their authenticity than their artistry? Across a range of current reviews, I notice recurring imagery: on the one hand, Chinese American women writers are characterized as "captivating," "enchanting," "enthraling," "mesmerizing," and "spellbinding"; on the other hand, they are extolled as "graceful," "guileless" storytellers, born to cross cultures. In other words, they must be "the real thing," the modern version of "the Chinese lady" who performs for our pleasure.<sup>14</sup>

13. This group included five other Chinese, ranging in age from five to thirty-two, including a "maid-servant," a "professor of music," his daughter and son, and an interpreter. Miss Pwan-ye-koo, according to Barnum, "will be pronounced peculiarly prepossessing . . . artless, refined . . . delicate in her deportment. . . . a capital specimen of a Chinese belle"; while her servant, a "fair specimen of the Chinese women of her class . . . comely and agreeable" also will offer "quite a study . . . for a curious observer" (6).

14. In "The Next Amy Tan," Nguyen (1997) reports that "the book publishing industry employs almost 85,000 men and women, from managerial to clerical to service positions. Only seven percent are blacks, while two percent are Asian American." Very few Asian Americans hold editorial positions at major publishing houses. As agent

Perhaps the endless intrigue of discovering and possessing a culture through its curios is why so many of my students expect Chinese American literature to be “strange and wondrous,” revealing East to West, making the foreign familiar. However, Tan (1996) tells us: “I write because there is a lot I don’t understand about life and death, myself and the world, and the great in-between. . . . I write to find the questions I should ask. And for me, stories are possible answers” (5). Finally, this may be what is most marvelous: the shared truths that writers and readers discover as they come together through language. For as Said (2000) observes in “The Politics of Knowledge,” the great literature of the world is to be appreciated across cultures “as literature, as style, as pleasure and illumination . . . [as part of] the large, many-windowed house of human culture as a whole” (372).

Students in my Asian American literature courses consistently find it eye-opening to consider how the significance of literary texts and the historical contexts of their reception are interlinked. Respect for the diversity and complexity of human identity is what they value in *The Woman Warrior*, what they look for in *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, what they find affirmed in Sui Sin Far’s essays and short stories. As students analyze the rhetoric of public reception, they realize how orientalist reading diminishes the possibility of such discernment. However, they also come to appreciate the rhetorics of self-resistance that Chinese American women writers have developed through their individual creativity, their social conscience, and their bold stance on questions of identity, difference, and community. As bell hooks emphasizes, deciding to “talk back”—in literature as in life—“challenges politics of domination” through the refusal to be “nameless and voiceless” (1994, 8). Contrary to the rhetoric of public reception, Chinese American women writers speak to us not from the distant East, but from the immediacy of multicultural American life, where they continue to contribute to the ongoing formation of our literary heritage.

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Sandra Djikstra notes, publishers keep asking, “Where is the next Amy Tan?”

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