Pluralist Universalism

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Published by The Ohio State University Press


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CHAPTER 5

Impersonal Intimacy
Yan Geling’s *Fusang* and Its English Translation

Love is an ethical and social responsibility to open personal and public spaces in which otherness and difference can be articulated. Love requires a commitment to the advent and nurturing of difference.

—Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing*

“Asian American” connotes the violence, exclusion, dislocation, and disenfranchisement that has attended the codification of certain bodies as, variously, Oriental, yellow, sometimes brown, inscrutable, devious, always alien. It speaks to the active denial of personhood to the individuals inhabiting those bodies. At the same time, it insists on acknowledging the enormous capacity for life that has triumphed repeatedly over racism’s attempts to dehumanize, over the United States’ juridical attempts to regulate life and culture.

—Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise*

My discussions of Kuo, Zhang, and Alameddine in previous chapters argue that these authors reconstruct histories of violent conflicts between the majority state and ethno-racial and religious minorities in a way that punctures the myth of an already achieved state of national harmony that prevails in both contemporary America and China. These authors engage, through their narratives, in the strenuous labor of reconceiving pluralist universalism in opposition to facile versions of it embodied in conciliatory multiculturalism. On the one hand, they suggest that building national solidarity, whether in civic or state-centric terms, frequently conflicts, sometimes violently, with assertions of historically shaped
group differences within a nation. On the other, they argue that the resulting tensions are not to be confined or suppressed; they should instead be confronted by both dominant and marginal social groups through a process whereby they work together on revising the terms and conditions of national identity in an ethos of openness and generosity. Kuo's idea of dissenting nationalism, Zhang's model of competing collectivisms, and Alameddine's rethinking of Christian universalism share an investment in exploring conceptions of national identities that emphasize both coherence and inconclusiveness.

What these authors do not pay sufficient attention to, however, is the ways in which individual subjectivity mediates, and is mediated by, the ideals of national identity they envision. They are more concerned with reconstructing neglected histories from scattered fragments of collective memory than with imagining how these histories relate to the individual psyche. This chapter takes up the topic of how the individual, embodied subject can become a battleground for different nationalist discourses and a site of psychic labor through which these discourses can be reshaped. It does so through a discussion of *Fusang*, an unusual novel by Chinese immigrant author Yan Geling. Published first in Chinese in 1996 and translated into English in 2001 as *The Lost Daughter of Happiness*, the novel offers a provocative portrayal of the titular character Fusang, a Chinese prostitute in nineteenth-century San Francisco. To the uneasy surprise of many, Fusang is depicted not as a victim of racial and sexual violence but as an enigmatic figure who actively accommodates the violent penetrations of her body. Her accommodation of sexual violence entails a rejection of the self-possessed, autonomous liberal subject and thus figures as a tactic of survival and resistance that turns the character into an unlikely pioneer of a new regime of subjectivity and relationality.

Although the name of Yan Geling may mean very little to U.S.-based academics, most Asian Americanists included, she is often commended by scholars in China and Taiwan as one of the most important Chinese-language authors in the United States. Before she came to the United States as a student in 1989, Yan had published three novels in China, where she was born in the late 1950s. During and after her study at Columbia College in Chicago for an MFA in fiction writing, she published award-winning short stories, novellas, and novels in Chinese-language literary journals in the United States, Taiwan, and China.² In 1995, she won a *United Daily News* Novel Prize with

1. Yan is also known as the script writer for the 1992 film *Shaonu Xiaoyu*, based on her novella of the same title, and as a co-script writer (along with Joan Chen) for the 1998 *Tianyu*, directed by Chen.
Fusang, the story of a village girl in Canton who was abducted, brought to the United States on a cargo ship, and sold into a brothel in nineteenth-century San Francisco Chinatown. Since then, Yan has continued to publish at a breathtaking pace, winning admiration from literary prize committees in both China and Taiwan and from established Chinese film directors, who have commissioned scripts from her or purchased the rights to her works. Yan has also experimented with writing in English. Her first English-language novel, The Banquet Bug, came out in 2007 to positive reviews.

The most interesting aspect of the novel Fusang, which makes it quite rare among Chinese-language writings in the United States, is that it is a fully transnational narrative with a history of reception in both the United States and China. My reading of the novel therefore pays close attention to its translation and reception, both of which consist of a series of appraisive, interpretive acts. The English translation, The Lost Daughter of Happiness, excises or shortens many passages in the original, seeking to make the translation read, in the words of Cathy Silber, the translator, more like an “English-language novel.” I draw particular attention to the textual alterations that accompany the novel’s entry into a different political and cultural context. In chapter 1, I point out a discrepancy between the English and Chinese versions of Jiang Rong’s Lang Tuteng. In the case of Yan’s Fusang, however, comparing the original and the translation is a much more crucial task. Passages that are excised from or abbreviated in the English translation, most of which contain descriptions (from the narrator’s or other characters’ perspectives) of Fusang’s unruly sexuality, become a kind of constitutive absence that signals a certain cultural anxiety. These editorial changes, no doubt, have centrally shaped Anglo-American responses to the novel, but they are also critical moves in their own right that implicitly pass judgment on what the novel does right and what it does not. Not coincidentally, the deleted and shortened passages also play a crucial role, either by being highlighted or ignored, in Chinese critics’ readings of the novel. I offer, in various sections of this chapter, an analysis of the interpretive, regulatory work that the translation

2. United Daily News literary prizes are among the most prestigious awards for Taiwan writers and Chinese-language writers around the world. Authors in China have also started to compete for the award.

3. Yan is the scriptwriter for Chen Kaige’s film Mei Lanfang, an autobiographical film named after its subject, the most important icon of Chinese opera. Zhang Yimou acquired rights to one of her recent novels Jinling shisan chai [Thirteen women in Nanjing].

4. Cathy Silber, Telephone Interview, Nov. 27, 2004. Silber informed me during our telephone interview that she was sometimes at odds with the Hyperion editor as to what changes were necessary, although she agreed with him on some alterations that would make the translation read more like an “English-language” novel. The author was consulted on most of the revisions, though Silber added that she did not seek to exercise control over the process.
process performs and what it may say about the ways in which the novel challenges the conciliatory logic of U.S. liberal multiculturalism. My own understanding of the novel, which I get to shortly, also anchors itself on the missing and shortened passages.

Along with comparing the two different versions of the novel, I explore the divergences and confluences between the interpretations of the central character Fusang generated in the United States and China. Anglo-American critics, with access only to the sanitized, incomplete version of the novel via the translation, have largely construed Fusang as a frustratingly inscrutable character, even as they argue that she subverts the orientalist imagination of Asian women. In China, Fusang’s accommodation of sexual and social violence and her ability to draw pleasure from it has caused misgivings in critics who read the character allegorically as a symbol of the Chinese nation that has been forced to contend with Western colonialism and political and cultural hegemony since the mid-nineteenth century. The characterization of Fusang is either criticized for its complicity with the orientalist feminization of Chinese culture or praised for accentuating the virtuous resilience that has enabled China to overcome its historical humiliations. The novel’s reception in China, then, illuminates a postcolonial understanding of the Chinese nation that approaches racialized experiences of Chinese immigrants in the West as an extension of China–West relations. This understanding, though not unjustified, provides important ammunitions for the party-state’s emphasis on national sovereignty and unity in all policy matters, including the policy of regional autonomy for ethnic minorities (as opposed to federalism), which was rationalized on the purported grounds that the different ethnicities in China forged unbreakable friendships during shared struggles against Euro-American (and Japanese) colonialisms during the first half of the twentieth century. The various competing interpretations of Fusang show us yet another way in which ideas of race and nation in contemporary America and China are interconnected. Even as Chinese immigration and Chinese immigrant writings reveal the limits of liberal acceptance of racial others in the United States, they broach the topic of U.S. racial dynamics in China, which often becomes entangled with discussions of U.S.–China relations and of such translated concepts as postcoloniality and orientalism.

Ultimately, I provide a new reading of Fusang that challenges nationalist discourses and nation-centered critical practices. These practices, I believe, suppress Fusang’s inexplicable queerness, normalizing her into an autonomous ethnic subject or a coherent embodiment of national identity. In response, I analyze the character through the very lens of queerness. I argue that her accommodation of sexual violence encodes a set of queer
practices that in effect challenge conventional (liberal as well as nationalist) configurations of individual subjectivity. The radical challenge embodied in Fusang suggests a psychic and corporeal basis for new forms of individual and collective identity and therefore the new models of national integration discussed in chapters 3 and 4. In dialogue with literary and theoretical traditions in both the United States and China, Yan’s novel turns what could have been a narrative of sacrifice and pain into a productive inquiry into the possibility of transforming versions of multiculturalism that prioritize the coherence of the nation, a goal often contingent on the disciplining of the (raced) female body.

**Opaque or Transparent?**

A third of the novel *Fusang* consists of second-person narration of the titular character’s experience. The rest is mostly third-person narration describing Fusang’s interactions with johns and with the missionaries trying to rescue her. The novel is also sprinkled with first-person narration in which the embodied, explicitly female narrator compares her own life with Fusang’s. There is certainly no linear narrative to be found in the novel, but the plot can be summarized as follows: Fusang is brought to California toward the end of the 1860s from a Canton village and sold into a brothel. She quickly attracts the attention of Chris, a white teenager; Da Yong, a Chinatown gangster; and Chinese laborers forced to live a bachelor’s life because of the immigration restrictions on Chinese women. She becomes Da Yong’s possession when she willingly allows him to take her away from the missionaries who are trying to save her. Meanwhile, Fusang develops a crush on Chris and initiates sexual relations with him several times. Their consummation does not happen, though, until a riot breaks out against the Chinese and Chris joins a group of rioters in gang-raping Fusang. Finally, she turns down Chris’s marriage offer and weds herself to Da Yong just before he is executed for killing a white merchant. She then returns to Chinatown and lives there until an old age.

Fusang is an imagined character based on and yet different from the descriptions of Chinatown prostitutes available in various historical documents. Although the narrator claims that Fusang is an actual historical figure

5. Benson Tong, *Unsubmissive Women*. In this book-length study of Chinese prostitutes, Tong maps out the history of Chinese prostitutes in San Francisco and on the frontier in general. Before the passage of the Page Law in 1875, which prohibited the entry of women for the purpose of prostitution, the majority of the adult Chinese women in California declared
documented in some of the “one hundred and sixty histories of the Chinese in San Francisco that no one else has bothered to read,” she implicitly undermines this claim by questioning the reliability of historical records, pointing out that they offer reductive or conflicting accounts of Chinatown prostitutes and the people surrounding them. The novel further hints at the ambiguous status of its central character with the very name of Fusang, which coincides with the title of Stan Steiner’s 1979 history of Chinese in America. Steiner explains that Fusang appeared in ancient Chinese chronicles as the name of a paradisiacal kingdom east of China discovered by a Buddhist priest Hui Shen in A.D. 499; modern scholars have quibbled over whether the discovery actually happened or whether the kingdom, if actually discovered, was an island off Japan or the Americas. The debates around the meaning of the land of Fusang underscore the slippages between history and myth. “Fusang” has another, similarly mythical meaning in Chinese, namely, a giant tree in the East where the sun rises. By naming her main character Fusang, therefore, Yan draws attention to the ways in which her representation of a nineteenth-century Chinese prostitute blurs the boundary between history and fiction and questions the presumed stability of historical knowledge.

Most American and British reviewers of The Lost Daughter of Happiness highlight the narrator’s disavowal of complete knowledge of Fusang’s character. Some see this renunciation of narrative authority as an implicit challenge to the Western complacency about being able to know the non-West. British reviewer Julia Lovell, for example, contends that, by having its subject remain “at all times opaque,” the novel subverts the “basic tenet of Orientalism—that the Orient can be read.” An American reviewer, Jeffrey C. Kinkley, also affirms the opacity of Fusang’s characterization for allowing the novel’s plot to break out of the predictable mold of “white men saving yellow women from yellow men.” Other reviewers interpret the lack of a

themselves as prostitutes in census forms (Tong, 30). Most of the prostitutes were imported and controlled by Tongs, secret societies in Chinatown (Tong, 10). Some of the women who came before 1853 operated as free entrepreneurs, the most notable example of which was Ah Toy, who arrived in San Francisco in late 1848 or early 1849 (Tong, 6). Also see Doris Muscatine, Old San Francisco. Muscatine also documents a “lone Chinese courtesan” who arrived in 1849. She was a “stunning twenty-two-year-old” with a dozen names, the most common of which were Ah Toy and Ah Choy (Muscatine, 205). Judy Yung’s Unbound Voices focuses mainly on the first part of the twentieth century, but it provides a California Illustrated Magazine article that condemns prostitution in Chinatown and cites a few real examples.

7. Ibid., 274.
well-defined central character as a deliberate attempt to unsettle the reader’s own sense of belonging. Rebecca Barnhouse, for example, speculates that the author consciously frustrates the readerly expectation for a sharply delineated protagonist in order to make the reader feel, along with Fusang, the pain of being “displaced in the physical and psychological landscapes” that one struggles to inhabit.11 In general, the reviewers of The Lost Daughter of Happiness argue that the novel subverts its Orientalist trappings by refusing to make Fusang a transparent object. Their unanimous focus on Fusang’s opacity, however, is not without problems.

While the Anglo-American readings just recapitulated do not reduce Fusang into a transparent racial stereotype, they are nevertheless reductive. In these interpretations, Fusang figures as little more than an empty signifier that warrants all manners of projections or subjective readings. This problem becomes more serious when we consider the less appealing implications of seeing Fusang as “opaque.” Indeed, one critic complains that “Fusang never becomes a fully realized character” and suggests that only readers with a “strong interest in the subject” should pick up the novel.12 We might say that Fusang’s, and hence the novel’s, purported opacity is yet another symptom of Western-centric approaches toward the non-West, which manifest, on the one hand, in subsuming the other as a known object and, on the other, in dismissing the other on grounds of inscrutable difference. By describing Fusang as “opaque,” the reviewers are seeking, arguably, to rationalize their inability to decipher the character. If this is the case, Fusang is not the only Chinese American female literary figure to be denied the status of a meaningful character that merits close attention. Chinese American writer Gish Jen once wondered aloud, during a luncheon-discussion with her readers at the Public Square in Chicago, why some reviewers of her latest novel The Love Wife had characterized one of its central characters, Lan Lan, a nanny from China, as an opaque figure that the author does not allow the reader to sympathize with or understand.13 Jen quipped that the reviewers had probably read “right past” the pages and pages of internal monologue attributed to Lan Lan.

For critics in China, in contrast, Fusang becomes an almost transparent signifier. Fusang’s experiences as a Chinatown prostitute serve to allegorize

13. As part of the Illinois Humanities Council, a nonprofit organization, the Public Square hosts readings, lectures, and public discussions of political issues. The occasion for Jen’s reading and luncheon-discussion, held on October 27, 2004, was the publication of her The Love Wife in that year.
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China’s encounter with Western imperialism and the racialization of Chinese immigrants in the United States from the mid-nineteenth century onward. A critic goes as far as to proclaim that the value of the novel lies in its reflections on the various power dynamics outlined in “postcolonial theory” and reads the desire between Fusang and Chris as a parable of the mutual fascination between the “mature West” and the “ancient East.” Many endorse the character’s indiscriminating hospitality, describing her as a Mother Earth figure, derived from archetypes in Chinese myth who absorb death and regenerate life. For these critics, Fusang can be construed as a symbol of the survival instincts of Chinese immigrants or “traditional Chinese virtues” that allow China and Chinese around the world to overcome a long history of being overpowered by Westerners. An almost equal number of critics, however, take Yan Geling to task for “internalizing” orientalist imaginings of China in her portrayal of Fusang. Fusang, under this critical perspective, symbolizes a fantasy of cultural reconciliation that masks the tenacity of the racialist “prejudices” stemming from the persistently unequal relations between East and West. Both the supporters and the detractors of the novel, however, converge on their use of an allegorical approach to it. They demonstrate that a certain postcolonial discourse—the notion that China has withstood successive waves of incursion by Western nations, which continue to exercise significant power over how China is perceived and positioned in the world—deeply influences how Chinese immigrant writings like Fusang are interpreted in China. Whether they warn of the continuing evil of Western neocolonialism or express confidence in China’s ability to survive and rise above Western dominance, Chinese critics of Fusang seldom stop to question the Jamesonian critical framework they use (Jameson’s theory of Third World writings is duly cited in some of the Chinese criticisms of Fusang) that interprets the character Fusang as a metaphor for the historical destiny of an undivided Chinese nation.

14. Li Xiaohua, “Fusang de renwu biaozheng he dongfangzhuyi wenhua duiying” [How characters in Fusang register orientalism], 211.
17. Teng Wei, “Huaxiang zongguo de fangshi” [The remembering of China in Yan Geling’s immigrant literature], 1.
Fusang’s reception history, therefore, constitutes an important site for studying the ways in which such concepts as Orientalism, anti-Asian racism, and postcolonialism have circulated between contemporary America and China. The introduction of theories of orientalism and postcoloniality into China in the early 1990s, combined with the “Chinese economic success,” has helped to consolidate Chinese nationalism, which justifies the heavy premium it places on the notion of unity, in a large measure, through invocations of China’s continuing vulnerability in the international sphere. The period since the 1990s has also seen a surge in state-centered expressions of Chinese nationalism, including renewed interest in traditional Chinese culture (in which state promotion plays a key role), mass civil protests against foreign impingement upon Chinese sovereignty, and, more recently, a heated online discussion of whether there is a constellation of cultural values that define Chineseness and how they might help or hinder China’s rise in world economy and politics. Heightened nationalist sentiments, naturally, inflect Chinese interpretations of Chinese immigrant writings in the United States, especially those written in Chinese, which often come to be read as allegories of China’s responses to Western powers, the United States in particular, in the post–Cold War period. To extol Fusang’s “traditional Chinese

19. Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang, “Introduction”; Dai Jinhua, “Behind Global Spectacle and National Image Making”; Wang Hui, “Contemporary Chinese Thought and Modernity.” Dirlik and Zhang point out that the appropriation of postcolonial critique in China “both indicates the heightened awareness of power relations in cultural production and manifests the kind of confidence derived from the Chinese economic success in the global market” (13, 14). Also see Dai, who notes that the surge of Chinese nationalism in the mid-1990s, often framed in anti-American terms, is closely related to “larger social critiques targeted at globalization, transnational capital, and the economic, cultural, and political imperialism of the West” (177). While Wang Hui takes notes of Chinese intellectuals’ criticism of nationalist sentiments in the 1990s, he also acknowledges that “[in] Chinese postmodernism, postcolonial theory is often synonymous with a discourse on nationalism, which reinforces the China/West paradigm” (170).


22. This discussion was first organized by Sina.com, the third largest website in China, to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the PRC. It caught enormous public attention in May 2009, when an essay written by a college professor for the website received surprisingly enthusiastic responses from common readers and was republished in print media. As of now, the discussion has engaged a large number of well-known public intellectuals and bloggers, as well as common Chinese, many of whom have ventured ideas about the most “universal” characteristics among the (Han) Chinese.
virtues” reflects the nationalist desire to construct an indigenous culture as a counterweight to Western cultural hegemony. To repudiate the character as a symptom of internalized orientalism indicates anxiety over whether this hegemony can be dislodged.

Yan’s novel, however, is not simply appropriated by different political and critical discourses; its translation into English, which in many ways conditioned its reception by English-speaking audiences, constituted a more forceful act of appropriation. The changes made in the translation, the removal and shortening of a large number of passages in the original, entail acts of interpretation that echo, even as it partially generated, Anglo-American reactions to the novel. These changes aim to make the novel safe for a liberal view of race, only to demonstrate the limits of liberal tolerance. To intervene in the existing readings of the translation, then, we need to recover what was taken away from the original Chinese version. This work of reconstruction allows us to see how the translation process, compounded by the politics of reading surrounding Chinese immigrant literature in the United States, severely obscures the novel’s formal and political sophistication.

Suppressive Irony

Two important passages narrated from Chris’s perspective are removed from the English translation, *The Lost Daughter of Happiness*. In the first passage, a sixty-year-old Chris remembers how he was surprised when, as a teenager, he first saw Fusang comply uncomplainingly with her johns. He believes that he is now finally able to understand Fusang’s inexplicable ability to draw pleasure from forced sexual acts. He concludes that Fusang embodies a “primitive maternity,” defined by “eternal suffering, boundless tolerance, and willing sacrifice:”

> “Maternity is the highest level of femininity—she opens herself to be plundered and invaded. She does not reject. Her indiscrimination is the most elegant form of wantonness.”

In the second passage, the narrator reveals the older Chris’s reflections on Fusang’s attempt to seduce him when she temporarily lived at the missionary house (from which she was soon to be taken by Da Yong). He concludes that Fusang is the “most authentic, most natural” woman because she lets everyone “plough” and “sow” her as “a plot of earth.”

These two passages undoubtedly prompt Chinese critics to interpret

24. Ibid., 85.
25. Ibid., 114.
Fusang as a Mother Earth figure, either criticizing her as a thoroughly orientalized fantasy or commending her as a symbol of Chinese resilience. The removal of these passages from the translation shows not that they would be unimportant from the perspective of English-speaking readers. Just the contrary. In fact, the translator explained their removal from the translation by saying that these passages are “too sentimental” and “overstated”—they are “telling, instead of showing” the reader what to make of the character Fusang. In other words, these passages would give the moral of the novel away; their removal, on the other hand, would ideally leave the English-speaking critics guessing about Fusang’s meaning. The critics of the English translation, consequently, became convinced of Fusang’s opacity, despite all the other suggestive passages designed to “show” rather than “tell” about the character. The Anglo-American interpreters of the novel (including the translator) and the Chinese critics, therefore, are actually much more similar than different—they both base their readings on explicit rather than descriptive passages. They either claim a complete understanding of Fusang when another character offers a reading of her or give up on deciphering the character when the more explicit passages are absent. Both groups of critics, from different ideological vantage points, elide the formal complexity of the novel.

Chris, in fact, can be read as an unreliable observer rather than a guide to Fusang’s interiority. The novel’s conscious exploration of the various contradictions in Chris’s oedipal/orientalist longing for Fusang suggests that we do well to read irony into his paean to Fusang’s “primitive maternity.”

The narrator attributes Chris’s infatuation with Fusang to a convergence of racial and sexual fantasies. When Chris first visits Fusang in her brothel as a twelve-year-old boy, he carries with him all the “fairy tales and adventure stories” he has consumed and the resultant view that the “Orient” is a realm of fascinating mysteries. For Chris, Fusang brings to life a fairy tale, her “cavelike room” figuring as a “distant kingdom.” The narrator suggests that Chris approaches Fusang with a set of Orientalist assumptions, which fuel his infatuation with her. Chris perceives Fusang’s accented, limited English phrases as primitive sounds that “predate human language,” and in so doing, projects her as an infant, or an innocent savage, untouched by civilization. Fusang’s bound feet impress Chris as “fishtails” that signify both “stunted

26. I obtained this information through my telephone interview with Silber.
28. Ibid., 15.
evolution” and cruel mutilation. Thus, the younger Chris imagines Fusang as part of a primitive culture that insulates itself from modern civilization and metes out cruel treatment to its women. Chris’s imagination is reminiscent of a range of orientalist discourses and images circulating in the nineteenth-century United States, such as the noble savage discourse (registered, for example, in Melville’s *Typee*) and the sensual images of women in the harem (reappropriated for example in Poe’s “Ligeia”). Yan’s novel, therefore, reverberates with contemporary historical and literary scholarship by figuring nineteenth-century U.S. orientalism as a contradictory, unstable structure of knowledge that consists of a hodgepodge of images about different parts of what is known as the “Orient” or Asia.\(^{31}\) Chris’s various assumptions about Fusang constellate into a sexualized fantasy of rescue. In the days following his first visit to Fusang, Chris wanders around in daydreams. As the narrator puts it, addressing Fusang: “His infatuation with you has left him time for nothing else. In his dreams, he is much taller, brandishing a long sword. A knight of courage and passion. An Oriental princess imprisoned in a dark cell waits for him to rescue her.”\(^{32}\) The “mutilated points of [Fusang’s] feet,” again, figure prominently in the boy’s fantasy.

The novel figures Chris’s unconscious as a repository not only of Orientalist fantasies about white men saving women of color from men of color but also of oedipal stereotypes of alluring mature women. Chris taps quickly into these stereotypes as he comes into contact with a sensual “oriental” woman. In the eyes of the twelve-year-old Chris, Fusang’s body is a “fruit heavy with juice,” “ripe to the bursting point.”\(^{33}\) “Her pursed lips and lowered lashes lent her face all the gentleness of a mother.”\(^{34}\) Chris’s desire for thrills turns into the kind of “adoration boys all over the world feel for ripe beautiful women.”\(^{35}\) While Chris regresses into childhood, Fusang is elevated to the status of a primal goddess, her thick long hair falling “like water, as black and impenetrable as sky began before time.”\(^{36}\) By juxtaposing Chris’s

\(^{30}\) Yan, *Fusang*, 11. Here I depart from Silber’s translation, which translates Yan’s original as “a stage of evolution no one has imagined” (Yan, *Fusang*, 14). Yan’s original literally translates as “a stage between evolution and regression” (Yan, *Lost Daughter*, 11), which I prefer to translate as “stunted evolution.”


\(^{33}\) Ibid., 16.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 12.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 16.

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 14.
oedipal infatuation with his heroic fantasy of coming to Fusang’s rescue, the novel shows that, for Chris, Fusang is at once a hypersexualized mother who incites penetration and a chaste whore who awaits salvation. Chris’s desire for Fusang, indeed, is a case that illustrates what Homi Bhabha terms “ambivalence” at the heart of colonial and racial desire.37

Chris’s characterization not only gestures toward the intersections of heterosexuality and racialized desire in nineteenth-century America. It also shows that infatuation with the racial and sexual other is bound up with a more insidious emotional undercurrent. Chris’s desire for Fusang is symbiotic with his fear of the otherness she embodies, a fear that is mostly displaced onto the Chinese men around her. As he goes through what seems to him Chinatown’s shady establishments and becomes exposed to anti-Chinese protests starting to flare up in San Francisco, Chris is increasingly gripped by the conviction that the Chinese, especially the male laborers who account for most of the Chinatown population, are an “inferior race” that should be “wiped out.”38 At some points, Chris’s desire to rescue Fusang seems to be motivated by or at least correlated with a different desire—the desire to distinguish himself from, as well as destroy, “those hideous Oriental buildings, all these grotesque feet and queues” and all these things that he “couldn’t understand.”39 Fusang also becomes a victim of this racial hate in the rape scene, which I discuss in the following section.

The novel’s orientalization of Fusang through Chris, therefore, might arguably be read as what Judith Butler calls, in her Bodies That Matter, a “critical mime,”40 which refers to an act of citing or appropriating dominant discourse that aims to expose its foundational violence. Indeed, one can say that the novel mimics Chris’s view of Fusang as a way of opening up a conceptual space beyond it. It suggests a critical vantage point from which one can see Chris’s complicity with the inherently violent racial stereotypes of exotic, passive, submissive, and sexually available Asian women.41 When the younger Chris believes that Fusang’s passivity gives her freedom, because she

37. Bhabha, 69. He uses the concept of “ambivalence” to indicate the contradictions in the “polymorphous and perverse collusion between racism and sexism” and in the subjectivities of both the colonizer and the colonized (69). Extrapolating from Said’s organization of “manifest” and “latent” orientalism into one congruent and intentional system of representation, Bhabha critiques the “closure and coherence attributed to the unconscious pole of colonial discourse” (72).
38. Ibid., 44.
39. Ibid., 198.
40. Judith Butler, Bodies That Matter, 47.
41. For a useful review of the Asian American feminist critique of these stereotypes, see Laura Hyun Yi Kang, Compositional Subjects, especially the chapter titled “Cinematic Projections.”
is a “body not ruled over by the soul,” he can be seen as positing an oriental and feminine other essentially opposed to his own repressed self, brought up on Calvinist teachings against physical desire and prohibited socially and legally to pursue his desire. When the older Chris, cited in the beginning of this section, fantasizes about Fusang as a Mother Earth figure who rises above unspeakable violence through her uncomplaining passivity and her “elegant wantonness,” he can be understood as enacting what Kristeva terms the ritual of “purifying the abject,” which in the case of the novel figures as Fusang’s othered, prohibited body.

The Anglo-American and the Chinese interpretations of Fusang outlined in the previous section, which emphasize her opacity and transparent symbolic value (as a metaphor for the Chinese nation), respectively, elide the ways in which the novel undercuts Chris’s perspective. The decision to remove these passages from the novel’s English translation might have been motivated by the fear that the passages, described by the translator as too “sentimental” and “overstated,” would repel the novel’s potential critics and readers in the West, who are presumed to be largely white, middle-class, and liberal. They might very well attribute these two passages to the author and subsequently criticize her for perpetuating an essentialist, exoticist view of Asian femininity and femininity in general. Chinese and other Asian immigrant literature is expected to adhere to the tenets of liberal multiculturalism and stage a critique of historical configurations (as opposed to the continual presence) of orientalism. Parts of Yan’s Fusang, however, might upset this liberal expectation and instead lead the average, supposedly careless American reader to believe that the novel is coopted by orientalism. The deletion of these two passages, then, provides a glimpse of how trade book publishing in the United States shapes Asian immigrant literature by exercising an overt form of censorship. The critics of The Lost Daughter of Happiness, one might say, exercise a more covert form of censorship by refusing to acknowledge parts of the novel that cannot be subsumed under a simple antiorientalist reading, literally dismissing them in describing Fusang as “opaque.” While the English translation has been made safe and palatable for mass consumption in the United States, it loses much of the original’s formal and thematic

42. Yan, Fusang, 86.
43. Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror, 17. Kristeva defines the abject as what is fundamentally suppressed from the human psyche. The abject is “the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses” (2). The abject appears either as “a rite of defilement and pollution” or as “exclusion or taboo” in various religions; religions and art both comprise various means of “purifying the abject” (17). In Bodies That Matter, Judith Butler defines the abject more generally as a social and psychic zone of uninhatability that “constitutes the defining limit of the subject’s domain” (3).
sophistication. The Chinese critics unquestioningly equate Chris’s perspective on Fusang with the novel’s largely to support their allegorical readings of the character as an emblem of the Chinese at home and abroad. As they use the novel to construct coherent narratives of the historical trajectory of China’s relation to the West, especially the United States, the Chinese critics fail to consider the possibility that the novel could at once imitate and subvert orientalist stereotypes in creating the figure of Fusang. The critics on both sides of the Pacific, therefore, converge in reducing Fusang to an unambiguous character and subordinating her to nation-centered interpretative frameworks. Fusang is turned either into a proper ethnic subject attesting to racial progress in contemporary American culture or into the quintessential modern Chinese subject struggling under Western domination.

**Signifying Excision**

I argued that the existing criticisms of Yan’s *Fusang* and its English translation show how different audiences, from different cultural and political standpoints, appropriate Chinese immigrant literature in the United States. Equally important, these critical appropriations are anticipated and mirrored within the novel itself, which dramatizes how various characters compete to possess Fusang in both epistemological and sexual terms. While the Chinese laborers and gangsters in the novel try to confine Fusang to the social and domestic structures of Chinatown, Chris, in both his younger and older versions, projects onto her, as I demonstrate in my previous section, an incoherent panoply of cultural stereotypes. One can see strong echoes between the male characters’ competing interpretations of Fusang and those of the novel’s critics. The allegorical readings generated in the Chinese context naturalize Fusang’s Chineseness, as does the heterosexual economy of Chinatown presented in the novel. Just as Chris turns Fusang into a desirable oriental by distinguishing her from the “hideous” surroundings of San Francisco Chinatown, the Anglo-American critics of the novel, along with its translator and publisher, are engaged in restaging Fusang as a proper racial subject who does not yield willingly to the sexual depravations of Chinatown’s male denizens and visitors.

Despite the competing efforts to comprehend and possess her, Fusang consistently fascinates, baffles, and disorients the novel’s male characters with her boundlessly open sexuality. Her at-home-ness with forced sexual transactions sets her apart from common tropes of fallen women, such as veteran prostitutes hardened against the world and prostitutes with a heart of
 CHAPTER 5

gold, who embody moral virtues under a worldly guise. She does not, apparently, see her role in terms of sexual slavery. Surprised at Chris’s age at their first encounter, Fusang nevertheless decides not to “cut a single corner with him,” instead smiling at him “as if he were a man every bit [her] match.” She also willingly accommodates Da Yong when she comes under his control. When Chris tries to kill Da Yong while the latter is asleep, Fusang quietly deters him by continuing to wash Da Yong’s hair as she was ordered.

Many of Fusang’s Chinese clients construe her effortless accommodation of their sexual needs as an expression of submissive affection and consequently propose to buy her out of prostitution and marry her. Da Yong quickly overpowers his rivals and takes possession of Fusang, petting her the same way he treasures his “dog,” “parrot,” and “jewelry case.” In a scene that literalizes Eve Sedgwick’s argument about male homosociality being triangulated through the female body, a brawl breaks out between Da Yong’s gang and a group of white passengers on a ship over the latter’s insulting remarks about Fusang and her music. Throughout the novel, the male Chinese characters vie with each other and with the dominant race for control over Fusang, all the while under the illusion of her willing submission. Though the novel fully acknowledges the historical, legal, and psychic structures that resulted in the gendered racialization of early Chinese migrants in San Francisco, it does not romanticize this racialized group. Just as it implicitly subverts Chris’s orientalist desire for Fusang through critical mimicry, the novel suggests the cost of Da Yong’s desperate defense of his own and the other Chinese men’s endangered masculinity by showing how it is predicated on the possession of Fusang’s body.

Each of the “readers” within the text seeks to stabilize Fusang’s implications for particular ethnic or national identities by domesticating her capacious, indiscriminate sexuality. Likewise, as we can see in the competing critical discourses around the novel, turning an enigmatic female figure in Chinese immigrant fiction into a modern ethnic or national subject is contingent upon shearing her sexuality of its inexplicable excess. The interpretive battles both within and around Yan’s novel demonstrate the ways in which Asian American women’s sexuality and subjectivity become, to quote

44. Yan, Lost Daughter, 15.
45. The slippage between prostitutes and domestic women, as presented in the novel, is peculiar to early Chinese immigrant history. Chinatowns in the U.S. had a predominantly male population until after World War II, when the 1945 War Brides Act started to increase the number of Chinese women immigrating to the United States. See Tong, 159.
46. Yan, Lost Daughter, 156.
47. Ibid., 164.
Leslie Bow, a “register of international and domestic struggle,” defined in conflicting terms by competing nationalist discourses.\textsuperscript{48} 

At one point, the novel seems to acquiesce with reductive readings of Fusang by toying with the possibility of her domestication through racially inflected heterosexual desire. Upon meeting Chris after a long absence, although Fusang draws a blank when trying to remember who Chris is, as would be the case with any of her other johns, she is eventually moved by Chris’s persistence at being accepted sexually. The narrator goes on to project a parallel between Fusang’s feelings for Chris and her own affection for her husband. Just as the narrator feels both infatuated with and distanced from her husband because of their perceived “differences,” Fusang develops a heightened sensitivity to Chris by becoming aware of how she is different from him: “You are aware of your strange feet, your cold faux jade bracelet. You’re aware of the heartbeat of every embroidered blossom on your peach silk blouse.”\textsuperscript{49} For a brief moment, Fusang seems to have been interpellated into the racialized economy of heteronormative desire that Chris inhabits and to have become a recognizable object of that desire. The younger Chris’s erotic gaze puts her through a process of subjectification, turning her into a desiring subject as well as a desired object.

However, the novel soon thwarts its own movement toward a standard interracial romance. The various legal and social restrictions prohibiting Fusang’s desire for Chris do not lead her to take her own life in the fashion of a betrayed Madame Butterfly. The novel gradually suggests that Fusang’s all-accepting sexuality, characterized as a form of pristine femininity by the older Chris, can be construed as a process of dismantling the normative desire that threatens to claim her. It is not a stretch to say that the novel not only critically mimics and therefore self-consciously critiques the various acts of appropriation to which Fusang is subjected but also illustrates how these forces can potentially be resisted and neutralized.

When Chris, as a young man in his twenties, proposes to marry her and then move with her to Montana toward the end of the novel, Fusang quietly leaves to prepare and stage a wedding with Da Yong, who is soon to be executed. Fusang’s apparent submission to the institution of marriage signifies just the opposite. Her marriage with the dead Da Yong, as the last part of the novel suggests, becomes an implicit statement of her refusal to marry in real life. It is indeed a final, definitive rejection of marriage. This ending decidedly distinguishes the novel \textit{Fusang} from Ruthanne Lum McCunn’s

\textsuperscript{48} Leslie Bow, \textit{Betrayal and Other Acts of Subversion}, 10. 
\textsuperscript{49} Yan, \textit{Lost Daughter}, 43.
Thousand Pieces of Gold, a novel based on the life of Lalu Nathoy, a nineteenth-century Chinese prostitute working in a mining town in Idaho. While McCunn’s novel largely revolves around Lalu’s love for and marriage with Charlie Bemis, a saloon owner, Fusang does not offer the satisfaction of a conventional interracial romance between a white man and an Asian woman.

Although Fusang’s rejection of marriage triggers profound confusion in the young Chris and, as he gets older, eventually compels him to think of the Chinatown prostitute as a form of primitive materiality that cannot be socially integrated, it is actually prefigured in a number of long passages that appeared earlier in the novel. In one scene, Chris follows Fusang back from a teahouse to her brothel. Dying to find out whether Fusang is in danger, Chris climbs up a small tree beneath Fusang’s window. When he flings himself forward and lands on Fusang’s window ledge, however, Chris is greeted by a shocking scene:

Her body was taking in a man. It was sleek with a faint film of sweat. She wasn’t resisting as he had expected, but accommodating herself completely to the man. The way the beach accommodates the tide.

... He thought there should be struggle, some sign of suffering. But what he saw instead was harmony. No matter that the man wore a queue, or that his sallow back was covered with grotesque tattoos—the harmony was beautiful.

Fusang’s embrace of this experience, for one thing, undercuts Chris’s fantasy of rescue and the underlying gendered pattern of racialization (Asian women are seen as hypersexual while Asian men are seen as either asexual or sexually perverted). The sight of Fusang drawing pleasure from her intercourse with a random Chinese man, unsurprisingly, baffles Chris, who has been conditioned to associate the masculinity of Chinatown laborers with grotesqueness.

But Yan’s staging of intraracial “harmony” in this scene is not a cultural nationalist proclamation of a natural erotic bond between Asian men and Asian women. Instead, it amounts to a description of a nonnormative sex-

50. Ruthanne Lum McCunn, Thousand Pieces of Gold.
51. Yan, Lost Daughter, 62.
52. A recent example of this version of cultural nationalism is Darrel Hamamoto’s film, Yellowcaust: A Patriot Act (2003), in which the University of California Davis professor includes clips from a self-made pornographic film that stars Asian actors. His expressive purpose was to
ual practice that can potentially challenge the reification of sexual, racial, and national differences. Fusang conveys her desire both for the Chinese man and for Chris (whom she sees) through bodily movements that are seductive, almost phallic:

Her body was [the harmony]’s basis; she controlled the advance and retreat.

... And [the pleasure] did not reside solely in her, the movement of her body spread it to the man, and her gaze sent it toward Chris.

Chris realized that now he was crying for a different reason. With the onslaught of the mysterious pleasure, his body unfolded and quickened in ways he’d never known. The movements of their bodies drew him into their rhythm.53

Fusang’s desire in this passage is not only active but expansive, contagious, and implicitly nonmonogamous as well. At this moment, probably against his own will, Chris’s murderous jealousy toward the Chinese john, his wish to “rescue the beautiful slave girl on her dying breath,” morphs into the pleasure of an imaginary sexual union.54 Although the sexual pleasure Fusang experiences and helps generate in Chris remains ambiguous, indefinable, and “mysterious,” it is clearly differentiated from what Chris sees as passive submission characteristic of primordial femininity.

How do we, then, understand Fusang’s apparently unintelligible sexuality? I submit that we consider Leo Bersani’s theory of impersonal intimacy, which builds on a series of writings since his 1988 article “Is the Rectum a Grave,” as a possible interpretive framework.55 In his 2002 article “Sociability and Cruising,” Bersani questions the disparaging definition in Freudian psychoanalysis of a male homosexual as one who “cruises the world...in search of objects that will give him back to himself as a loved and cared for subject,”

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53. Ibid., 62, 63.
54. Ibid., 61.
55. Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?”; Homos; “Sociability and Cruising.” In “Is the Rectum a Grave?” Bersani points out that while sex is often practiced to create “a hyperbolic sense of self, it also potentially implies “a loss of all consciousness of self” (218); he posits the enhancement of the latter aspect of sex as the aim of radical sexual politics. He builds on this argument in Homos, where he considers the possible manners in which male homosexuality provides a “privileged vehicle” for self-shattering sex (10). “Sociability and Cruising” continues the line of thinking presented in Homos, explaining in more detail the psychic resources and labor required for constructing new forms of intimacy dissociated from the fortification of the self.
recasting this longing as a radial form of sexuality. By loving others as the self, Bersani argues, the gay cruiser recognizes that “difference can be loved as the non-threatening supplement of sameness,” thus providing an alternative to the normative, heterosexual approach to sexual difference.\(^{56}\) Cruising, therefore, constitutes a form of training in “impersonal intimacy,” namely, sexual relations that do not result in psychic individuation through the simultaneous eroticization and repudiation of the gendered other.\(^{57}\) Embracing impersonal intimacy, for Bersani, helps build a psychic foundation for relating to the other in general, on both sexual and nonsexual levels, as supplementary to the self. That is to say, both heterosexuals and homosexuals can practice impersonal intimacy, to different extents and at different costs, and, in so doing, disrupt normative heterosexual desire organized around reified sexual difference.

Sexual difference, it needs to be emphasized, claims a unique position in Bersani’s theory of impersonal intimacy. Although he allows in his essay that sexual difference should not be “prejudicially sanctified in our psychoanalytically oriented culture as the ground of all difference,” he adds that it perhaps “does have a unique epistemological function in human growth as an early and crucial model for structuring difference.”\(^{58}\) In contrast to Bersani’s proposition, the representation of Fusang’s sexuality in this important passage unsettles the normative operation of both sexual and racial differences without attributing to one mode of differentiation more psychic and social importance than it does the other. In *Racial Castration*, David Eng argues that psychoanalytical theories and queer discourses can be useful for Asian American and critical ethnic studies if we open them “upon a social terrain marked not by singular difference but by multiple differences.”\(^{59}\) Indeed, the passage where Fusang derives pleasure from forced intercourse shows both the usefulness and the limitations of psychoanalytically informed queer theories for analyzing how Chinese immigrant literature interrogates the construction of social differences.

Although Fusang’s desire is not exactly homosexual and she of course does not cruise the world, she, like the gay man posited in Bersani’s article, shows the same ability to approach the threatening other as the “non-threatening supplement” of herself. One can, therefore, simultaneously claim a kind

\(^{56}\) Ibid.
\(^{57}\) Leo Bersani, “Sociability and Cruising,” 17.
\(^{58}\) Ibid., 17. This view of sexual difference is a slight change from the one expressed in a slightly earlier article “Against Monogamy.” In that essay, Bersani explicitly parallels sexual difference with “national, racial, religious, ethnic” differences (4).
of queerness for Fusang and reinscribe queerness as disruptions of not only sexual but also racial and ethnic differences and as a process of becoming rather than a stable component of one’s identity. As demonstrated in her interactions with Chris, Fusang manages racial and sexual trauma, registered on her body in the form of violent penetration, by being hospitable to and drawing pleasure from it. She goes through a ritual of coquetry with any random client, as she does with Chris: she would pour some tea, turn to smile at the customer, adjust her shirt, and then wait a moment.\(^{60}\) In one of the passages deleted from the English translation, the narrator describes, from Fusang’s perspective, one of her sexual experiences, in which she reaches the acute pleasure lying at the far end of “a vast plain of pain” by treading over “resistance and unwillingness, shame and anger.”\(^{61}\) By showing how Fusang turns the pain of sexual servitude into a source of pleasure, this passage might very well disturb middle-class American readers. This concern might have motivated the removal of this passage from the English translation. The omission obscures the ways in which the novel appropriates conventional forms of female sexual service, like prostitution, in order to stage new modes of relating to the racial and sexual other. Inserted back into the translation, the passage suggests that the peculiar form of sexual hospitality that Fusang exhibits not only reconciles her with the violent world around her but actively intervenes in it as well. Fusang’s vastly expansive desire temporarily dissolves Chris’s hatred of the Chinese johns. The visual pleasure he feels signifies either a cross-racial identification (with the Chinese john) or a cross-gender and cross-racial identification (with Fusang), both of which are precluded from the racial and sexual economy of the nineteenth-century San Francisco presented in the novel and, to a different extent, from today’s America.

As Bersani argues, impersonal intimacy entails both self-extension and self-subtraction. By practicing sexual acts like cruising, one can learn to refrain from the wish to be individuated from all otherness and embrace one’s numerous inaccurate replications in the world, thus extending oneself into the world in a nonaggressive way. Just as Bersani’s notion of impersonal intimacy, an expansive connectedness, is predicated upon the work of self-subtraction, Fusang’s all-accepting sexuality is based on the stripping away of her sense of an enclosed, autonomous self. Right after the scene just discussed, Fusang gets up and “splash[es] herself with water to wash off [menstruation] blood.”\(^{62}\) Watching her from outside the window, Chris is “shocked” at

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Fusang’s “nonchalance” toward blood. Fusang seems indifferent to, or intent upon dismantling, the difference between inside and outside, private and public. As blood trickles down her leg, Fusang fails to cohere into a subject with easily recognizable boundaries. She has become a kind of uncountable body inextricable from the world. As the narrator puts it, Fusang’s body “doesn’t count now.” This image emblematizes Fusang’s resistance toward being counted, or categorized as a normative female subject that upholds a specific set of nationalist discourses. The novel’s representation of Fusang’s open-ended sexuality suggests that acts of survival can be continuous with the process of forging new kinds of subjectivity that do not strive toward autonomy or coherence.

The novel stages the most extreme implications of Fusang’s sexuality in the gang-rape scene. The race riot that occasions the rape of Fusang bears some resemblance to historical accounts of race riots against the Chinese that happened in the 1870s in Los Angeles, Chico, and other parts of the American West. As the English translation shortens the extensive description of the rape in the original (which underscores, again, that the translator of Fusang and the publisher of the translation construed parts of the novel to be unacceptable to mainstream American readers), I have to quote mainly from the Chinese original in my following analysis. Speaking in second person, the narrator equates Fusang’s experience of being raped and her daily interactions with her johns, “You can’t tell the difference between selling your body and gang-rape.” If an important difference between rape and prostitution is the supposition of female consent, this difference is all but nonexistent in the case of Fusang as presented in the novel. The novel’s equation of rape and prostitution mirrors inversely the analogy Andrea Dworkin draws between prostitution and gang rape in her essay “Prostitution and Male Supremacy.” Both the novel and Dworkin’s essay point out that women do not consent to prostitution, just as they do not consent to rape, because they are not legally or socially defined as sovereign subjects in full possession of their bodies. However, while Dworkin calls for changes in social structures that will enable women to attain to subjecthood, Yan gestures toward a critique of the very

63. Ibid.
64. Ibid.
65. Sucheng Chan, Asian Americans, 48–49.
66. Yan, Fusang, 183.
67. Andrea Dworkin, “Prostitution and Male Supremacy.” Dworkin criticizes the tendency among academic feminists to discuss prostitution in abstract, theoretical terms. She explains how prostitution facilitates unmitigated violence against women by making the following statement, “The only analogy I can think of concerning prostitution is that it is more like gang rape than it is like anything else” (3).
notion of subjectivity, characterized by autonomy and individuation, as a source of social violence. We cannot expect to universalize access to subjectivity, that is to say, without changing its premises.

From the translator and publisher’s perspective, perhaps, Fusang, with all her provocative complexity, would not be able to strike a chord in the novel’s mainstream reader who is likely to have been socialized into liberal notions of the sovereign subject. It is perhaps why the rest of the paragraph that begins with the sentence just quoted is completely deleted. I therefore translate it as follows:

One can even say that you never felt you were selling your body at all, because you accept the men. There is equality in your interactions with the men: You find pleasure even as you are physically violated, and you take away from the men what you give them. Instinctively, you have transformed the traffic in your body into exchanges between and among bodies. Your body is so hospitable that you never realized that you had had to exchange it for money. Encounters between and among bodies allow different lives to converse with and learn from each other.

This makes me suspect again that you, Fusang, are from a very old time.68

The last sentence of this passage seems to suggest that the narrator is aligned with the older Chris, who sees Fusang as a symbol of primitive, pristine femininity. But if this passage indeed posits an originary femininity, it does not signify, as the older Chris believes, a boundless ability to countenance suffering and regenerate life. It does not justify rape by implying that it satisfies women’s masochistic sexual fantasies or, in other words, their proclivities for suffering, nor does it stop at critiquing rape as traffic in the female body. Instead, it proposes a possible antidote to rape impulses by teasing out the radical implications of the survival tactic Fusang uses in this scene. As Fusang imagines the process of the rape as “exchanges between and among bodies,” she becomes a conduit of a subversive, self-subtracting sexual practice. This passage suggests, therefore, that, by embracing differently configured bodies without feeling threatened, in other words, by practicing a form of impersonal, indiscriminate intimacy, we could start, as Fusang does in this passage, to dissolve conventional notions of subjectivity grounded in entrenched social difference. The dissolution, in turn, would make impossible the resentment of the other that feeds such misogynist (and racist, in this particular case) practices as rape.

68. Yan, Fusang, 183.
The novel’s representation of Fusang, as I pointed out earlier, is in conversation with various historical studies of the experience of Chinese prostitutes in nineteenth-century America. It rewrites conventional historical narratives that cast these women as either victims or agents seeking control of their own lives and, in so doing, resonates with and contributes to contemporary critical inquiries into subjectivity and relationality. Bersani’s ideas of impersonal intimacy and self-divestitude are by no means the only critical resource useful for our understanding of the radical implications of Yan’s novel. Contemporary feminist theories have also questioned the idea of autonomous, individuated identity by reimagining the female body. Some feminists, borrowing from different intellectual and scientific traditions, focus particularly on theorizing the interconnectivity between different bodies as a sexual corollary of intersubjective conceptions of identity. Christine Battersby, for example, builds her conception of the female body over and against the equation of embodiment with an experience of containment posited in Lakoff and Johnson’s theories of metaphor (which believes that the experience of containment gives rise to mental patterns—or schemata—that constrain metaphorically how we conceptualize other relations). Battersby argues for a fluid understanding of the body by citing embodied experiences peculiar to women (menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth), modern topological theory (which sees form or structure as a temporary stability in patterns of flow) and new scientific paradigms of form, and historical formulations of the body (as seen in Nietzsche and Bergson, among others) that broke from a rigidly masculine view of the body as coherent and well-contained. As Battersby points out, she is not alone in making this argument; many others, including Irigaray, Harraway, Emily Martin, and Kelly Oliver, to name only the most obvious suspects, have reenvisioned the (female) self/body in terms of “patterns of potentiality and flow.”

69. Autonomy has always been a key idea in feminist philosophy, not always connected to the issue of the body. See Marilyn Friedman, “Feminism in Ethics: Conceptions of Autonomy.” Friedman points out that “[t]he standard current feminist account of autonomy may be called a social or relational account,” variants of which have been offered by many feminist philosophers, including “Evelyn Fox Keller, Jennifer Nedelsky, Seyla Benhabib, Lorraine Code, Morwenna Griffiths, Alison Weir and Susan Brison” (217).

70. Christine Battersby, “Her Body/Her Boundaries,” 355. For two more examples of this theoretical negotiation, see Allison Weir, Sacrificial Logics; Jane Caputi, “‘Take Back What Doesn’t Belong to Me’: Sexual Violence, Resistance, and the ‘Transmission of Affect.’” Weir uses Kristeva to distinguish between dominating and nondominating identity, arguing that the “separateness or identity of the self” does not have to presume the suppression of nonidentity; in fact, “[i]deally, the identity of the self is based on the acceptance of the nonidentity of others, and of the nonidentity within oneself” (13). Caputi discusses sexual violence toward women as a transmission of affect, the “dumping” of negative emotions from the masculine subject to the
relevant to efforts in U.S. ethnic studies, including Asian American studies, to reconfigure identities organized around race, ethnicity, and nation. Kandice Chuh’s argument against referential understandings of the term “Asian American,” for example, grounds itself in the larger argument against taking the universal “citizen-subject” and the proper, rights-bearing “subject of the law” on face value. Such a poststructural project requires not only intervention in conventional narratives but also investment in reimagining and reorganizing embodied practices. As Yan suggests through Fusang, a necessary ingredient of the ongoing theoretical efforts to break the false dichotomy between reified national identities and reified minority identities is to intervene in the corporeal and psychic dimensions of the process of identity formation.

The idea of an embodied subject seeking disembodiment by circulating itself among other bodies might seem unattainable. But the novel suggests that it could be concretized in the future and that a condition of possibility for attaining this new kind of subjectivity resides in reflections on the violence inherent in normative sexual desire. The narrator relates that Fusang feels her strength drained away and experiences a taste of “humiliation” when Chris joins the rapists and yet tries to set himself apart from them by being tender toward her. The “little bit of tenderness” that Chris tries to give her generates in Fusang a traumatized reaction—she feels humiliated and tries to break away from Chris. Fusang’s humiliation suggests a perception of the profound contradictions within the racialized economy of heterosexual desire. Chris’s sexual longing for Fusang, expressed through violent penetration in the rape scene, becomes literally intertwined with an outburst of racial hate. His attempt to instill some “tenderness” into this sexual act does not offset its violence; instead it overlays the violence of subjectification upon that of physical domination. Fusang tries to manage the traumatic effects of this redoubled violence by treating Chris like everyone else, biting off one of his buttons as a reminder of her “peculiar contact” with him. It can be argued that Fusang’s resistance toward heteronormative, monogamous desire, manifest later in her refusal to marry Chris and in her decision to wed herself to feminine other. Healing from such abuse, for Caputi, entails self-cleansing through reconnecting with the positive, elemental forces in the world. This process repudiates sexual violence as a form of, but “as force of connection, linking us energetically to each other, to the elements, and to a divinity that is experienced not as a transcendent White father god . . . but on earth, . . . and in other sexual bodies” (12). One’s embodied connections to the environment thus facilitate the reconstitution of a female self in the wake of masculine violence.

72. Yan, Fusang 185; Lost Daughter 225.
73. Yan, Fusang 231; Lost Daughter 189.
74. Yan, Fusang, 184; Lost Daughter 224.
Da Yong right before his execution, derives from her intuitive understanding of the contradictory and traumatic nature of this desire. Her social position as a racialized, sexualized object and her refusal to be coopted by socially instituted desire enable her to personify a new mode of subjectivity and relationality. Although Fusang’s rejection of normative subjectivity does not immediately produce an ideal alternative within or outside the text, she at least suggests a condition of possibility for approaching this ideal.

**A Chinese Peasant Woman**

We should certainly not read *Fusang* only through the scrim of literary and cultural theories produced in the United States. The author, in fact, has made it clear that the novel, to her mind, engages with multiple cultural contexts. In an interview she gave in 2003, Yan Geling indicates that she has become aware of the critical resistance to and appropriations of the novel. She takes pain to distinguish the figure Fusang from the more well-known prostitute figures in Chinese and Western literary canons, including, in particular, Dumas’s Camille, who is remembered for her “helplessness and sacrifices.” Fusang, by contrast, embodies a new form of feminism. As the author puts it, “Fusang is a feminist with strength that surpasses men’s. She embodies a modern ethos—she values freedom, refuses to bind herself to one man, and is completely open to physical pleasure.”

Fusang is a figure who “transcends reality” in a politically meaningful way, the author adds, implicitly refuting the Anglo-American critics’ comment that the character comes across as pointlessly opaque. In the same interview, Yan also indicates that she is apprised of some Chinese critics’ complaint that the novel made them “feel uneasy,” speculating that this may be a reaction to her dispiriting description of the male Chinese immigrants. In her own defense, she describes the characterization of Fusang as a deliberate critique of a kind of reactionary mindset that fuels some of the “senseless resentment” that the Chinese sometimes display against Westerners. The character is meant to frustrate the nationalist sentiments of many Chinese and provide a corrective to their oscillation between “excessive pride” and “excessive shame” in perceiving themselves vis-à-vis the West.

75. Ya fei, “Zai haiwai xiezuo: zuojia yan geling fangtanlu, zuojia Yan Geling fangtan lu” [Writing from overseas: An interview of Yan Geling].
76. Ibid.
77. Ibid.
78. Ibid.
79. Ibid.
Though Fusang should not be read as an embodiment of a unified, triumphant Chinese nation, she speaks to an important strain in contemporary Chinese literature. Another point the author makes in the interview is that, while the character is surreal, she is solidly grounded in the author’s understanding of what a “sturdy Chinese peasant woman” might look and think like. Fusang’s peasant origin (she is literally born a peasant girl in Canton in the novel) suggests the novel’s possible affinity with the concept of minjian proposed by Chinese critic Chen Sihe, who, not coincidentally, has written some of the most widely cited critical essays on Yan. Chen defines the concept of minjian, which translates literally as the “sphere of the people,” as the cultural customs, sentiments, and aesthetic preferences of the lower strata of people in rural and ethnic areas, over which state power has weakened or incomplete control. The most important characteristic of minjian is its relative freedom from dominant ideologies and mores, although it can generate its own, sometimes extremely oppressive, power structures. Minjian figures in contemporary Chinese literature as “invisible structures” that slyly throw into question its more politically conformist elements. Chen’s idea of minjian resonates with some of the subversive tactics that have been identified in American literature, including critical reappropriation, signifying, and, as I invoked earlier, critical mimicry. The passages deleted from the English translation of Fusang can be aptly described as manifestations of minjian in the novel, as they present unconventional modes of pleasure and resistance that belie the novel’s superficial resemblance with an allegory of China’s struggles against the West. Disrupting the master narratives of official, postcolonial Chinese nationalism, the novel Fusang runs in the same vein as Xinling Shi, where the idea of minjian also registers. Chen explicitly associates Yan’s portrayal of Fusang with his conception of minjian in his comments on Yan’s 2006 novel Dijiuge guafu [The ninth widow], which portrays a Fusang-like character in a rural part of Henan, a province in central China. The peasant woman Wang Putao weathers the series of political movements during the second half of the twentieth century in the same way that Fusang weathers her various sexual encounters, that is, with indiscriminating openness and tenacious simple-mindedness. For Chen, Wang Putao represents an extension of the indomitable, undisciplined life force already present in Fusang.  

80. For Chen, representations of minjian became self-conscious with the rise of the “roots-seeking” writers in the 1980s. The politics and aesthetics of minjian reached a new level in the 1990s, when many writers turned to minjian for new forms of idealism that do not derive from state ideologies. See Chen, Zhongguo xianandangai wenxueshi jiaochen [History of modern and contemporary Chinese literature], 12–14.

81. Chen Sihe, Ziji de shujia [My own bookshelf].
Drawing from and addressing cultural coordinates in both the United States and China, *Fusang* is an appropriate work with which to end my discussion of the two multiculturalisms. In the novel, moments of violence become a plea for narrative and intellectual labor aiming to uncover new grounds for radical, noncomplicitous responses to power. The character Fusang, a product of this labor, bodies forth a self-subtracting, nonaggressive mode of subjectivity shaped in the active accommodation of a web of otherness. Simultaneously one and many, Fusang can be read as a study of the subjective conditions for the construction of functional but maximally heterogeneous collective identities, whether ethno-racial or national. The novel, therefore, helps imagine and broker a radical kind of pluralist universalism, an ideal shared, albeit imperfectly, by Kuo, Zhang, and Alameddine alike.