"PERIPHERAL" CHINESE AMERICANS
AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF
CHINESE DIASPORA, TRANSNATIONALISM, AND RETURN

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The ethnic category of "peripheral" Chinese Americans encompasses ethnic
Chinese who do not come from mainland China but come from other parts of Asia and
Southeast Asia such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. In the
struggle with their hybrid and diasporic identities and their double marginality, these
"peripheral" Chinese Americans have to confront not just U.S. Orientalism but also
Chinese nativism's claim to cultural traditionalism in the name of racial authenticity. The
latter is achieved through the historical and ideological workings and transformations of
Chinese return, and its influence on the formation of a Chinese transnational imaginary.
The impact of return on this imaginary emerges in the 1997 Hong Kong handover, which
one can theorize as a mass-mediated, globalized space where the ideology of return is
disseminated to an imaginary community of diasporic Chinese. The handover and its
terrifying Other, Tiananmen Square, form critical and contradictory aspects of the

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diasporic consciousness of Hong Kong Americans, forcing them to engage in cultural negotiations, as Marilyn Chin's poetry in *The Phoenix Gone, The Terrace Empty* and Wayne Wang's *Chinese Box* illustrate. One finds another configuration of return in a Chinese cosmopolitanism that forges a link between transnational capital and neo-Confucian humanism. Going beyond a critique of this alliance, the work of Li-Young Lee presents the beginnings of a critical alternative to this cosmopolitanism. The multiply-inscribed identities of "peripheral" Chinese Americans also suggest the theoretical importance of hybridity and the challenge it presents to Chinese return and the contradictions of cultural identity formation. Although Shirley Geok-lin Lim's academic memoir *Among the White Moonfaces* effectively uses cultural hybridity to unhinge the hegemony of Western imperialism and "Third World" cultural chauvinism, it fails to address the questions of class privilege and institutional elitism. And finally, as a Singaporean-Chinese in the United States, I write myself into this project through an analysis of my response to the Michael Fay incident and an examination of Fiona Cheong's poetics of innocence in *The Scent of the Gods*, in order to foreground the Singaporean American's struggle to overcome the politics of inertia.

CHAPTER 1
FROM PERIPHERY TO PERIPHERY:
"PERIPHERAL" CHINESE AMERICANS AND THE MYTHOGRAPHY OF
CHINESE RETURN

The discursive terrain of Asian American studies in the 1990s has undergone

significant changes since the inception of the Asian American Movement in the late

1960s and the formation of the first Asian American studies program at the University of

California at Berkeley and San Francisco State University.[1] In re-assessing the field of

Asian American literary studies, King-kok Cheung notes that while "identity politics –

with its stress on cultural nationalism and American nativity – governed earlier

theoretical and critical formulations, the stress is not on heterogeneity and diaspora. The

shift has been from seeking to 'claim America' to forging a connection between Asia and

Asian America."[2] In a specific way, Cheung's observation exemplifies James Clifford's

argument that "diasporic language appears to be replacing, or at least supplementing,

minority discourse."[3]

It comes as no surprise that this foregrounding of heterogeneity and diaspora

within Asian American social and critical discourse arises in tandem with the economic

ascendancy of Asian countries within the Pacific Rim, particularly in the 1980s and early

1990s, and with the post-World War II neo-colonial entanglements of the United States

within the region in the form of anti-Communist military adventurism and transnational

capitalist hegemony. The U.S. Cold War era policy of Communist containment is

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inextricably bound to the promotion of capitalist ideology through, for instance, the political support of certain authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes in Asia, so as to promote political "stability" in the region and, consequently, to ensure a supply of markets and cheap labor for U.S. transnational corporations as part of their flexible accumulation strategy.[4] This political and economic network created ultimately facilitates the diasporic flows of immigrants, exiles, refugees, students, professionals, and intellectuals into the U.S.,[5] especially from the "Third World" and, in particular, Asia.

This Asian influx was due in part to the Immigration Act of 1965, which marked a significant and important shift in a U.S. immigration policy that had been plagued by a racist history of anti-Asian legislation dating back to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.[6] The 1965 law fundamentally reversed the earlier policy of exclusion by dismantling "the national-origins quotas and the Asia-Pacific Triangle concept," both set up by Congress to limit Asian immigration, and by encouraging reunification of family members separated by the exclusion acts.[7] This political "change of heart" might in part be attributed to the fact that the U.S. government's position had become increasingly contradictory in its attempt to maintain a racist policy at home while functioning as the unofficial global police in criticizing human rights violations and abuses abroad. For instance, after World War Two, the international community's "acceptance of the U.S. as wartime leader of the free world added pressure to abolish all racially discriminating policies and to adopt immigration policies congruous with democracy's fight against fascism."[8] Another reason for the 1965 shift in policy was to promote the interests of U.S. transnational capital in the Asia-Pacific region, for the U.S. government "could no longer afford to maintain a blatantly racist immigration policy with respect to the

region"[9] when its goal was to create a political and social climate in the Pacific Rim countries congenial to U.S. business interests.

By briefly drawing out the relationships between transnational capitalism, the trans-Pacific Asian migration, and the U.S. Immigration Act of 1965, I seek to highlight their significance to the current emphasis in Asian American studies on the problematics of heterogeneity and diaspora, especially by cultural and literary critics in the field. In opening the immigration floodgates, the U.S. government did not anticipate the in-pouring of Asian immigrants, not only from China and Japan (as families are being reunited after years of separation due to the exclusion acts) but also from India, the Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other Southeast Asian countries.[10] Although the presence of these new Asian migrants has infused "new blood" into the Asian American communities, they also further contribute to the heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity[11] of Asian America in ways that extend beyond the categories of ethnicity and national origin. By conceptualizing the Asian American experience through the notions of heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity, cultural theorists can disrupt, as Lisa Lowe argues, "the dominant, 'orientalist' construction of Asian Americans" (67) and can disengage the nativism-versus-assimilation binary logic (75). Asian American cultural identity, therefore, should be theorized not "as a fixed, established 'given,'" but rather being in a continual process of flux and transformation (64). I also find Lowe's deployment of the term "multiplicity" particularly useful in that it prevents the slide of "heterogeneity" and "hybridity" into an uncritiqued celebration of differences, as is evident in the current predicament of the multiculturalist project. By defining "multiplicity" as "the ways in which subjects located with social relations are determined

by several axes of power, [and] are multiply determined by the contradictions of capitalism, patriarchy, and race relations" (67), Lowe foregrounds the questions of class, gender, and uneven power differentials that confront the Asian American community, especially with the arrival of the post-1965 immigrants. The Immigration Act of 1965 has created what John Liu and Lucie Cheng calls a "duality of Asian immigration" into the U.S., where the migrants that arrive are no longer made up of the semi-skilled or unskilled but also include the professional and managerial class.[12] Hence, to flatten the distinct class differences in order to initiate this latter group into the majority/minority paradigm of U.S. race relations is to ignore the possible intra-ethnic tensions created by class, which will ultimately affect Asian American solidarity[13] and cultural identity.

The growing presence of a diasporic consciousness in post-1965 Asian American cultural productions also stems in part from the need of Asian Americans to articulate this heterogeneity, multiplicity, and hybridity in their social and cultural identity formation. To highlight one's diasporic-*ness* is to engage questions of cultural translation, deterritorialization, displacement, all of which contribute to an understanding of Homi Bhabha's notions of hybrid "in-betweeness."[14] Diaspora also means disrupting the notion of immigrants as Lockean tabulae rasae upon which "American" culture can be easily inscribed for assimilation purposes. Instead of resorting to an essentialist response, as the editors of *Aiiieeeee!* have in the 1970s,[15] a diasporic consciousness ultimately hopes to reinscribe the historical, political, and cultural connections of the Asia-Pacific, Asian America, and the United States; and to problematize the hermetic views of U.S. history by situating it "within the context of a broader regional perspective . . . [in order] to question the ways in which it has been conceived and written."[16] Though "Sau-ling

Wong cautions against an uncritical adoption of a diasporic perspective because it vacates the position on the domestic American scene that Asian Americans hold to create their own panethnic solidarity and identity with people of color,"[17] my sense is that the goals of panethnic solidarity and those of diasporic studies of Asian Americans need not be antithetical or mutually exclusive; in fact, diaspora provides moments of self-critique within the field by challenging theorists to rethink constantly the category of Asian American and not prematurely settle for a cementing of the term in reaction to the dominant discourse of racial taxonomy.

The above deliberation on heterogeneity and diaspora is my circuitous way of mapping out the historical and theoretical contours of Asian American discourse in order to situate the topic of this project: "peripheral" Chinese Americans[18] and the problematics as evident in their cultural productions. The issues that I have raised above will be of relevance when I focus on the specificity of peripheral Chinese Americans.

The category of peripheral Chinese Americans is clearly an artificial ethnic subgroup, which I am designating as a site for cultural analysis and intervention. Peripheral Chinese Americans (PCAs), for the purposes of this project, refer to Americans of Chinese descent who are not from mainland China but come from countries such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, and other Asian and Southeast Asian countries, representing part of the Chinese diaspora or, what some sinologists and historians of Chinese history have recently termed, "Greater China," a concept I will deal with later in this chapter. It is significant at this point to note that there is a merging of the diasporic histories of PCAs and the early Chinese migrants to the U.S. Both groups can trace their ancestries to the

originating point of the Chinese diasporic movement: the earliest Chinese Americans arrived in the U.S. directly from China, whereas the ancestors of the PCAs settled in other parts of Asia before their descendants migrated to the U.S.

Early in the fifteenth century when Chinese junks plied the Southeast Asian trade routes, many Chinese began settling in places like Malacca and some intermarried with the locals. The greatest wave of migration from China to various parts of Asia occurred between 1848 and 1888 during the Ch'ing dynasty, leading to the arrival of even more Chinese in Southeast Asia, the West Indies, and Australia,[19] and, hence adding to the growing Chinese population in these regions. The post-1965 migration of the Chinese from Southeast Asia, Taiwan, and Hong Kong to the U.S. would eventually help constitute the category of PCAs.

The diasporic history of the Chinese Americans also runs parallel to that of the PCAs. Between 1848 and 1888, migrants coming directly from China arrived in Hawaii and in the continental United States through California, many of whom were lured by the Gold Rush of 1849, and later by the coolie trade and indentured labor system to supply the needed manpower[20] for the building of the transcontinental railroads. These migrants would form the ancestral lineage of the pre-1965 Chinese Americans. The influx of Chinese migrants into the U.S. abated in 1882 with the Chinese Exclusion Act, and it was not till 1965 that the Chinese diasporic flows resumed with fewer restrictions.

Meanwhile, between 1882 and 1965, much transpired for the multiple generations of Chinese diasporics who had settled in their host countries in Asia and Southeast Asia (the ancestors of the future PCAs). New cultural, political, and national identities were forged. Many are also considered cultural hybrids, such as the Peranakans (products of

Malay-Chinese intermarriages) in Malacca, Penang, and Singapore, who are also known as Straits Chinese,[21] many of whom do not speak the Chinese language but still identify themselves as Chinese ethnically. The turbulent history of twentieth-century China also witnessed the birth of Taiwan and colonial Hong Kong. The cultural identity of the Chinese population in these two countries has also been transformed, particularly by their political distance from mainland China. Migrants from all of these different Asian countries form a significant part of the post-1965 Chinese influx into the U.S. (with the mainland Chinese making up the rest of this migration) and would help build the PCA population. Though the PCAs strongly cling to their ethnic identity as Chinese, they are different culturally, socially, and politically from both the earlier Chinese Americans and the new immigrants who come directly from China.

The perimeters I have set for the category of peripheral Chinese Americans are artificial in that the category's boundaries are fluid and permeable; in incorporating the experiences and cultural productions of particular groups in this study, I will inevitably leave out many others. Hence, instead of aiming for an exhaustive enumeration of all the possible hybrid subgroups in such a category, which is not only counter-productive but also antithetical to the overall agenda of this project, this study aspires to examine the problematics laid out and the questions raised in select cultural texts of PCAs in an attempt to understand and theorize about the experience of the PCAs in order to *further destabilize* the boundaries of the ethnic category, instead of *reifying* them. The interventional function of questioning cultural boundaries is to challenge the center-periphery paradigm deployed by Chinese cultural chauvinism globally, and by racist ideology within the U.S.; for the "periphery" in PCAs denotes for them a double

marginality, emphasizing not only their marginal status within Chinese culturalism,[22] but also their place in the shared marginality of U.S. ethnic minorities.

Two other objections which may be raised against such a project merit consideration. One might argue that by further subdividing a minority group, am I not splitting, so to speak, ethnic hairs and fueling further division in an already fragile panethnic solidarity? Would not one also be guilty of reifying the center through the margins when engaging the specificities of the PCAs. With reference to the first question, I believe the above discussion on heterogeneity and the significance of diaspora to Asian American studies in a way addresses this issue; but I would also like to invoke Lisa Lowe's argument against conceptualizing cultural identity as a stable and fixed entity for the purposes of political solidarity:

> The articulation of an "Asian American identity" as an organizing tool has provided a concept of political unity that enables diverse Asian groups to understand unequal circumstances and histories as being related. . . . Yet to the extent that Asian American culture fixes Asian American identity and suppresses differences—of national origin, generation, gender, sexuality, class—it risks particular dangers: not only does it underestimate the differences and hybridities among Asians, but it may also inadvertently support the racist discourse that constructs Asians as a homogenous group, that implies Asians are "all alike" and conform to "types." (70-71)

In response to the second "objection" against reifying the center through the margins, I refer to a text by Gayatri Spivak where she addresses the question of class consciousness by "naming" the subaltern:

> The subaltern is all that is not elite, but the trouble with those kinds of names is that if you have any kind of political interest you name it in the hope that the name will disappear. That's what class consciousness is in the interest of: the class disappearing. *What politically we want to see is that the name would not be possible.*[23]

This political gesture of naming a category in order to "erase" it serves to unhinge the very mechanism of domination that produced the category in the first place. Another point that needs to be made regarding this notion of "erasure" as deployed in conjunction with ethnicity is that it is not meant to deny the cultural materiality of ethnic groups or subgroups, but rather it serves to problematize the nativist's claim to cultural and racial authenticity and purity. So, to "name" the peripheral Chinese American culture is to disturb the sanctified cultural boundaries of Chinese and Chinese American culture, which in turn leads to the re-examination of Asian American identity and, ultimately, of the very category of "American" culture itself.

This last point provides a convenient segue towards an articulation of the main goals of this cultural critical study on PCAs. I envision this as an interventionist project that will enable one to *begin* (i) to "unlearn," as Rey Chow puts it in *Writing Diaspora*, the "submission to one's ethnicity such as 'Chinese-ness' as the ultimate signified,"[24] as a means of challenging Chinese nativism's claim to the category in the name of cultural authenticity and racial purity; (ii) to interrogate the "limits" of categories such as "Chinese American," "Asian American," and "American," and "what is left out,"[25] by engaging the questions raised within the dynamics of a diasporic consciousness, such as cultural identity, hybridity, deterritorialization, imaginary homelands, class differences, the politics of citizenship, and imagined (national and transnational) communities; and (iii) to move the PCA's *doubleness* of marginality beyond a sense of paralytic contradiction to that of a more productive, and less myopic, critique of oppressive, hegemonic ideologies within the interlocking axes of race, gender, class, and sexuality.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will focus on the mythography of Chinese return and its politics so as to tackle Chiness-ness as a cultural construct. As a point of entry, I will first provide a brief "reading" of the British return of Hong Kong to mainland China as a means of tapping into the metaphoricity of the event, especially as a cultural signifier for the Chinese in diaspora, in order to theorize a Chinese transnational imaginary. Such a reading will allow me also to critique the binary logic of center versus periphery, and Chinese nativism versus Western modernity; and to unmask the complicitous role such logic plays in its co-optation by U.S. Orientalism and the culture of transnational capitalism.[26] It is then within the midst of this cultural critique that I would like to situate the peripheral Chinese Americans and examine how the discourses of Chinese culturalism, U.S. Orientalism, and late-capitalist ideology delimit their place within American society.

Hong Kong 97: Return in the Chinese Diasporic Imaginary

> Our delegation's trip to Hong Kong will surely reflect the feeling of glory and
> pride of all our nationalities regarding Hong Kong's return to the motherland. . . .
> Chinese President Jiang Zemin[27]

> From the perspective of those in Tibet, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, the prominent
> question is . . . *Can one say no to China?* The significance of this question, which
> would require interested scholars to confront the contradictions of Chinese as a
> constructed ethnicity, is yet to be recognized in the "cultural studies" relating to
> "China."
>
> Rey Chow[28]

> This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past.
> Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps
> piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would
> like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a
> storm is brewing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence
> that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into

the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

<div style="text-align: right">Walter Benjamin[29]</div>

July 1, 1997: the day the world's attention was riveted on Hong Kong; the day Hong Kong officially returned to the Chinese fold after 156 years under British colonial rule; a day of epic "history" in the making! But, for me, to contemplate the "historicity" of the event is also to have Benjamin's "angel of history" color my sense of the moment with profound irony and contradiction. While in Singapore at the time of the Hong Kong handover, I gathered with my family and relatives before the television set to witness the event in all its spectacle and pageantry. What struck me as remarkable is not only the mediatized "celebration" that transpired on the screen, but also the verbal storm that was brewing in our living room, leaving wreckage upon wreckage of bruised egos and conflicted cultural identities, traces of history—diasporic and colonial. In identifying with their Chinese ancestry and, being part of postcolonial Singapore, rightly resisting British imperialism, some of my relatives see this event as a glorious reclamation of lost Chinese territory from the former British Empire and a restoration of the honor and "face" lost when a severely weakened and outmatched Ch'ing government capitulated to British gunboat diplomacy during the Opium Wars. On the other hand, others sense, as Rey Chow does, that "one cannot but problematize 'China' . . . at the same time as one dismantles 'Britain'"[30]; for in light of the Tiananmen massacre, Hong Kong is seen as being in transit "between colonizers," as an authoritarian regime replaces an exploitative one.[31] For them, the countdown to July 1997 was fraught with much apprehension and fear that those who chose (or had no choice but) to remain in the now renamed Hong Kong SAR (Special Administrative Region) may eventually forfeit their civil rights to the

incoming regime. For most of us, there was a general sense of contradiction and paralysis in terms of conflicting allegiances and political identifications, a state of mind that arises from an "unwilling[ness] to criticize . . . [the] hegemony [of Third World ruling elites] for fear of playing into the hands of Western imperialism,"[32] a fear that obviously needs to be overcome. In a microcosmic way, the varied reactions evoked before the television set in our living room reflect the heterogeneous responses to the Hong Kong return among Chinese in diaspora.

This notion of contradiction—political and cultural—forms a kind of metanarrative in counterpoint to the almost seamless grand narrative of Chinese return as constructed in the well-polished mediatized spectacle of the Hong Kong handover. The key themes of this multimedia extravaganza were "celebration" and "reunification," which of course ironically begs the questions, "What exactly is there to celebrate?" and "What does reunification ultimately mean for the Hong Kong people?" The sheer size of the event and the carnival atmospherics were carefully calibrated to dissipate, overshadow, or mask the ominous tension in such questions. The spectacle of "celebration," hence, served to displace or even erase the historical memory of its terrifying Other, the spectacle of violence, as enacted on the square of Tiananmen. This "blemish" in Chinese history, however, could not be allowed to disrupt the Hollywood-style show and party the incoming government and its sympathizers had drawn up. Festivities include numerous "Celebration of Reunification" carnivals, fun fairs, exhibitions, galas, parties, mass dances, parades, localized ceremonies, countdown balls, banquets, a fireworks display (at Victoria Harbour), musical extravaganzas and concerts featuring local and international pop stars and celebrities, and finally culminating in the

pomp and military pageantry of the Joint Sino-British Handover Ceremony held at the

Convention and Exhibition Centre attended by Prince Charles, Prime Minister Tony

Blair, President Jiang Zemin, and Premier Li Peng.[33]

Before I begin reading the *tropological* significance of the handover for diasporic

Chinese, I believe it is important at this juncture to acknowledge the material reality of

those whose lives are most directly affected by this historic event: the Hong Kong people

themselves. In the tumultuous explosion of celebration activities and in the grand scheme

of geopolitical relations between Britain and mainland China, the Hong Kong people and

their voices face erasure. Their transparency in this narrative of "history" is echoed in the

following sentiments of Hong Kong students studying in the U.S.:

> What can a ceremony like that mean to us as a whole when it wasn't even
> accessible to the common majority? . . . That says to me that this doesn't
> involve us. Just as the actual flags of Hong Kong were smaller and
> secondary to the flags of the United Kingdom and the People's Republic
> of China, so is the real Hong Kong.
>
> The most striking effect of this occurrence was the image of C. H. Tung
> [Beijing appointee to oversee Hong Kong's transition] standing side by
> side with China's current president Jiang Zemin, speaking the language of
> the Motherland rather than the language of the people he was chosen to
> govern. Many local residents were bothered by this fact, and rightly so.[34]

The liminality of the Hong Kong people in the proceedings marks their continued

marginalization within the scheme of British and Chinese national self-interest. As

Ackbar Abbas theorizes, one of Hong Kong's ways of coping with this crisis is through a

cultural and political aesthetics of "disappearance" as a strategy of subjectivity,

producing a kind of ironic counter-discourse of resistance through self-erasure.[35]

For diasporic Chinese, the significance of Hong Kong's return to the

"Motherland," though it cannot be matched by the immediacy and urgency the moment

holds for the people of Hong Kong, still assumes a potency in the construction of Chinese identity and culture. As President Jiang Zemin noted in a speech on his way to attend the handover ceremony (see the first epigraph of this section), Hong Kong's return should evoke "glory and pride" in every true-blooded Chinese. His point strategically serves to interpellate ethnic Chinese, at home and abroad, through the nationalist rhetoric of return. It is important to note that this production of a "mythography" (which Arjun Appadurai defines as a public discourse constructed "by a mass-mediated imaginary that . . . transcends national space)[36] of Chinese return is not new or specific to the question of Hong Kong's handover; there is a historical, cultural, and philosophical lineage that takes on a special resonance for many ethnic Chinese, something that Jiang Zemin consciously taps into by subtly shifting the focus from the national implications of the event to a broader ethnic and diasporic one.

The notion of Chinese return is deeply embedded in Chinese cosmological and ontological thought; for instance, the very name of China, *Zhongguo* or, literally, "Middle Kingdom," semantically reifies the centrality of "China" in the hearts and minds of its people. Traditionally, "the view of being at the center of existence has always been an important aspect of being Chinese" and such a "view is based on a deep-rooted sense of belonging to a unified civilization that boasts several thousands of years of uninterrupted history."[37] At the epicenter of this history, at least up to the Ch'ing dynasty,[38] is enthroned the Chinese Emperor; the notion of centrality, as embodied in the person and position of the Emperor, radiates outward to encompass within its sphere the Chinese nation, Chinese culture and society, and geographical China.[39] Hence, many Chinese

pride themselves in their racial purity by being able to trace their ancestral links to the Yellow Emperor Huang Ti.[40]

As integral to its logic, any concept of "return" presupposes a prior movement away from a center and demands a movement back to that same point of origin. Centrifugal forces in the form of political fragmentation and diasporic flows characterize much of modern Chinese history, thereby producing this need for "return." Early Ming traders and merchants represent the beginnings of the diasporic flow, a trickle that turned into a flood of migration (with varying degrees of intensity) during the Ch'ing period, the Nationalist era, and during Communist rule from 1949 to the present. Territorial fragmentation began with the loss of Macao to the Portuguese in 1557, Hong Kong (and later the Kowloon Peninsula) to the British after the Opium Wars, and the formation of the Republic of China (in contestation to the PRC's claim of legitimate rule) on the island of Taiwan. All these forces constitute disruptions to the centrality of "China"; therefore, in the Chinese mind, "return" becomes part of an inexorable, logical progression, the telos of which is to restore once again the glory of Chinese centrality.

The ideology of Chinese return functions on at least three interconnected levels, the first of which is political. Though many diasporic Chinese acknowledge the uncertainty of democracy's future in Hong Kong's reunification with the motherland, their celebration stems from the view that Hong Kong's return signals the first step towards complete political unity: Macao in 1999 and, possibly even, Taiwan's reconciliation and reunion with the mainland, the ultimate goal of Chinese political reunification. Hence, the Hong Kong handover is pregnant with political symbolism emblematizing this hope. The "one country, two systems" model, as set out in the Joint

Declaration on the Question of Hong Kong (December 19, 1984), was carefully
engineered to suggest, as Premier Li Peng does, that "it can also work for Taiwan,"[41] a
suggestion that has met with tepid response, if not outright rejection by the Taiwanese.
However, many in Taiwan still cling to the possibility of return, instead of declaring its
independence as a Taiwanese state. Such a sentiment can partially be explained in terms
of the ideology of Chinese centrality and return, apart from, of course, the significant
threat of Chinese military retaliation against such separatist moves.

Physical return constitutes the second level of Chinese return. This need to go
home to the motherland is of particular importance to the Chinese diaspora (*huaqiao*).
Early migrants to Southeast Asia and the United States, for instance, visualized
themselves as sojourners, temporary residents in a foreign land, whose purpose was to
accrue wealth so as to return to China to live the remainder of their days in comfort and
luxury. The Chinese four-word paradigm *yeluo guigen* metaphorically encapsulates this
attachment to the homeland and the imperative of return, an expression that, when
loosely translated, "characterizes the Chinese abroad as fallen leaves that must
eventually, even inevitably return to their roots in the soil of China."[42] Though some
succeed in returning, a review of Chinese diasporic history will reveal that many do not,
the result of a multiplicity of push-and-pull factors[43] functioning as incentives, barriers,
or obstacles discouraging return. Even with the hope of a permanent return to China
extinguished, some diasporic Chinese in various parts of the world still harbor the dream
of being buried in their ancestral homeland, a tolerable quid pro quo for a chance to live
out their remaining years in the motherland. The notion of return has been so ingrained
into the cultural fabric of the diasporic Chinese psyche that even subsequent generations

of ethnic Chinese, who no longer have ties to the mainland and who loyally pledge national allegiances to their country of citizenship, often believe in the cultural value of visiting China, especially in their old age, engaging in a sort of quasi-return to one's roots, even if it is only in a superficially touristic fashion.

The preeminence of political and physical return in Chinese diasporic thinking naturally filters down to the cultural level forming the third way return operates. For whatever reason a physical return is unfeasible or impossible, one could still return to the "homeland" in one's heart. Such a "return," therefore, takes on a cultural emphasis as diasporic Chinese seek to accentuate aspects of what they believe constitutes their Chinese-ness, often through a return to Chinese culture and the arts, the Chinese language, and "traditional" Chinese values, ideals, and philosophies. The movement towards a cultural center, however problematically that center is defined, provides a channel of resistance to racist or assimilationist politics they encounter. On the other hand, the danger in such reactive culturalism lies in its ethnocentric potential and in its reification of East-West differences and the center-periphery dichotomy, issues I will address in the next section.

These different strands of Chinese return work together to add to the emotional resonance and cultural significance Hong Kong's return has for diasporic Chinese. But what made this event successful in its invocation and dissemination of the ideology of return was its ability to involve its audience vicariously in the physicality of return through a mediatized global space of interaction, instantaneity, and participatory presence. The Chinese diaspora was brought together *communally* for those few hours of celebration, thanks to the ability of late-twentieth century telecommunications wizardry

to bridge migrant peoples through space and time. Cognizant of this potential, the mainland government wasted no effort in enlisting the media's power to reach ethnic Chinese on a worldwide scale. Via global satellite link-up, diasporic Chinese and the rest of the world experienced live television coverage of the handover ceremony and the "party" that was to precede and follow it. Cyberspace potential was similarly tapped into: Internet users could witness the handover live from noon June 30 to noon July 2, courtesy of the Computer Services Centre of the Chinese University of Hong Kong in collaboration with Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) and other Internet services.[44] Since June 1997, cinema audiences across Asia and Southeast Asia also saw the release of *The Opium War*. Helmed by well-known Chinese director Xie Jin, the 9.6 million-dollar film, though not an official government production, helped to elicit nationalist fervor and provided a filmic channel for the mainland government's criticism of Western imperialism, all through the cinematic lure of epic story-telling and mass entertainment. As the 74-year-old Xie explains, "The aim of shooting such a movie is to remind all Chinese of the past. For any nation, ignorance of the outside world means backwardness, and a backward country is doomed to be bullied."[45]

The emotional and cultural pull of communal identification through a mediatized event such as the Hong Kong handover takes Benedict Anderson's idea of a nation's "imagined community"[46] to a new transnational level, the impact of which cannot be dismissed. The Chinese government saw and used the ideological flow generated by a Chinese transnational imaginary and its links to mass mediation to disseminate their rhetoric of political return. Here I am using again Arjun Appadurai's terminology and concepts articulated in *Modernity at Large*, where he examines how a nascent

"postnational imaginary" emerges from the relationship "between mass mediation and migration" to constitute what he calls "diasporic public spheres."[47] (I have chosen, however, to conceptualize the mythography of return within the framework of a Chinese *trans*national imaginary, as opposed to Appadurai's *post*national one, as it may be premature to herald the demise of the nation-state and, hence, underestimate its effectiveness in enacting cultural and racial violence.) What is of particular relevance to my argument here is that Appadurai also observes how the ideological flow between media and audience is not unidirectional—as in "the theory of media as the opium of the people"[48]—but rather, it is interactive:

> As mass mediation becomes increasingly dominated by electronic media
> . . . , and as such media increasingly link producers and audiences across
> national boundaries, and as these audiences themselves start new
> conversations between those who move and those who stay, we find a
> growing number of diasporic public spheres.[49]

In offering both positive potential and hidden dangers, this diasporic network is significant in two ways. Firstly, the fact that audiences are not simply static receptacles for ideological fashioning through the media foregrounds the complex and often conflicted identity formation of diasporic individuals, as illustrated by my relatives' contradictory reactions to the question of Hong Kong. They interact with the mediatized transmission and with one another; decisions are made, often prematurely, on cultural and political positions and re-positioning; and the mythography of return is challenged or reaffirmed, and frequently restructured into hybrid formations. It is in this discursive swirl of ideological interaction that the intervention of a radical politics of critique becomes especially necessary and urgent. Secondly, in spite of the fact that the mythography of return as transmitted via the mediatized "ideoscape"[50] of the Chinese

culturalists—in "conversation" with diasporic Chinese—to propagate sinocentrism, the possibilities for dialogue within the diasporic public spheres should encourage radical diasporic Chinese to use this channel for the contestation and critique of ethnocentric culturalism. Instead of fearing the accusations of disrupting ethnic solidarity and unity, one should problematize such imagined communality by unmasking its exclusionary cultural politics.

Problematizing Return: Cultural Traditionalism and U.S. Orientalism

The term "Greater China" (*dazhonghua*) has gained, in recent years, much currency in media and scholarly circles, prompting even *The China Quarterly* to devote an entire volume (vol.136) to discuss the use of the expression in various discursive and disciplinary spheres. The semantic value of the term varies significantly, depending on whether one is thinking along economic, political, or cultural lines; as Harry Harding, in a definitional essay featured in the above-mentioned volume, attempts to articulate:

> As is so often the case with the phrase of the moment, however, the precise meaning of "Greater China" . . . is not entirely clear. In essence, it refers to the rapidly increasing interaction among Chinese societies around the world as the political and administrative barriers to their intercourse fall. But different analysts use the term in different ways. Some refer primarily to the commercial ties among ethnic Chinese, whereas others are more interested in cultural interactions, and still others in the prospects for political reunification. Some observers focus exclusively on Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan and mainland China, others incorporate Singapore, and still others include the overseas Chinese living in South-east Asia, America and Europe. To some writers, "Greater China" is simply a way of summarizing the new linkages among the far-flung international Chinese community; to others, it is a prescription of the institutions that should govern those ties.[51]

Harding and the various contributors to the issue have been cautious enough to identify the hegemonic potential of such a term, but the privileging of it in Chinese and Chinese-

related discourse raises interesting, if not troubling, concerns for my problematization of

return. As Harding's definition above suggests, "Greater China" as *cultural*

nomenclature arises from the center's need to engage the diaporic Chinese's claim to

Chinese cultural authenticity, dissonant voices that can no longer be ignored, especially

in light of the latter's economic ascendancy in the Asia-Pacific region and their

contribution to China's economic restructuring. But in extending the hand of recognition

and concession, the double-edged term reinscribes center-periphery cultural relations

through the production of a concentric hierarchy with "China" still occupying the core,

radiating influence outward through the diasporic sphere. Hence, it is of no surprise to

hear cultural critics and sinologists, in dealing with the *suddenly* important question of

defining Chinese-ness in the midst of diasporic de-centering,[52] call for new cultural

strategies such as "Confucian humanism,"[53] homeland-in-the-heart,[54] and "Chinese

cosmopolitanism,"[55] most of which re-articulates the old ideology of Chinese cultural

return within a contemporary globalized framework.

To problematize Chinese return, one needs first to deconstruct the binary logic of

nativist traditionalism versus Western modernity that structures its rhetoric. This logic

forms a comfortable part of the age-old East-West conflict in China's historical

"tradition" of resisting the imperialistic encroachments of the West, territorially,

economically, and culturally. As much as the project of anti-Western imperialism is

laudable, Chinese traditionalism frequently resorts to cultural chauvinism, uncritiqued

nostalgia, and a primitivism that privileges traditional or ancient culture as authentic.

Such nativism, unfortunately, replicates the kind of cultural violence one finds

inexcusable in Western imperialism and colonization in the first place, as Rey Chow, in analyzing the paradox of primitivism, concludes:

> In a culture caught between the forces of "first world" imperialism and "third world" nationalism, such as that of twentieth century China, the primitive is the precise *paradox*, the amalgamation of the two modes of signification known as "culture" and "nature." If Chinese culture is "primitive" in the pejorative sense of being "backward" (being stuck in an earlier stage of "culture" and thus closer to "nature") when compared to the West, it is also "primitive" in the meliorative sense of being an ancient culture (it was there first, before many Western nations). A strong sense of primordial, rural rootedness thus goes hand in hand with an equally compelling conviction of China's primariness, of China's potential primacy as a modern nation with a glorious civilization. This paradox of *a primitivism that sees China as simultaneously victim and empire* is what leads modern Chinese intellectuals to their so-called obsession with China.[56]

Furthermore, it is important to see this traditionalism not simply as a knee-jerk response to Western cultural imperialism, but also as a political tactic that paradigmatically formulates and reformulates "Chinese culture" within the rubric of tradition in order to meet the political or discursive contingency of the moment. To illustrate this point, one need only turn to the speech of Hong Kong's Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa, given on the first day of Chinese rule of the Hong Kong SAR. In promising to be tolerant of dissenting viewpoints and to "protect individual rights," Tung also emphasizes "collective responsibility." Because "Hong Kong has embraced the eastern and western cultures," he reasons, "we will continue to encourage diversity in our society, but we must also reaffirm and respect the *fine traditional Chinese values*, including filial piety, love for the family, modesty and integrity, and the desire for continuous improvement."[57] What Tung has done is to ethnicize the latter as "Chinese values" so as to establish, through a return to Chinese tradition and culture, an interpretive loophole for justifying

future acts of authoritarianism, a rhetorical move not unlike those made by other authoritarian and semi-authoritarian governments in Asia and Southeast Asia.

The fact that Chinese traditionalism can be and has been deterritorialized through a mythography of return within the Chinese transnational imaginary illustrates Stuart Hall's point that globalization has its *localized* cultural effects, in this case the dissemination and strengthening of Chinese chauvinism, especially in the diasporic Chinese's response to the Western host nation-state's "regress[ion] to a very defensive and highly dangerous form of national identity . . . driven by a very aggressive form of racism."[58] Peripheral Chinese Americans, for instance, find themselves caught between the tense and violent space of these polarities, and are coerced to embrace either Chinese (or Chinese American)[59] nativism or Anglo-American culture. The assimilationist demands of the latter need to be rejected *tout court*, while the former's identity politics, being similarly violent in its culturalism, is no less acceptable; for Chinese traditionalism confronts PCAs to meet its demands and standards of cultural authenticity: Can you speak the Chinese language? Are you well versed in Chinese culture, traditions, history, and social practices? In other words, prove to us that you are as Chinese as we are!

Ironically, such reactive nativism, instead of disabling racism and the dominant logic of assimilation, supplies its opponents with ammunition by allowing the recourse to cultural nostalgia, primitivism, and traditionalism to be co-opted by U.S. Orientalist discourses. This unwitting "cooperation" has led Rey Chow to describe Western Orientalism and Third World nativism as "the obverse and reverse of the same coin," and to expose, for example, "the *alliance* of nativist elitism and institutional Orientalism" in the teaching of Asian literatures in universities across the U.S.[60] Chinese traditionalism,

thereby, reifies the exotic and primordial (hence, degenerate, uncivilized, and sensual) stereotypes of the Chinese already established in the public imaginary by government, political, literary, and media discourses throughout U.S. history.[61] Such images of the exotic and the evil (think sensual Suzie Wong, the inscrutable Charlie Chan, and the diabolical Fu Manchu) become interchangeable with the more recent configuration of Asians as industrious and passive "model minorities," a shifting politics of imaging the Asian "Other" to suit the political goals of the racial dominant. Both stereotypes, in serving to maintain the Us/Them division, provide the basis for "dominating, restructuring, and having authority over" the Oriental Other, as Edward Said's *Orientalism* demonstrates.[62] This form of U.S. Orientalism participates in what Malini Schueller calls the "task of imperial self-definition" where "various raced and gendered distinctions between" Orientals and Anglo-Americans "are deployed to repress or allay fears about the wholeness and stability of the nation in the face of diverse ethnic immigration and African American and Native American presences."[63]

Stereotypes such as these do not simply remain within the "imaginary" but are frequently translated into the U.S. public sphere of governmental and institutional legislation, where policies discriminatory towards Asian Americans and immigrants are enacted. Lisa Lowe is correct to observe how culture has become the site of conceptualizing American citizenship (2-3); Asian Americans are the outsiders-inside, the "foreigner-within" (5):

> In the last century and a half, the American citizen has been defined over against the Asian immigrant, legally, economically, and culturally. These definitions have cast Asian immigrants both as persons and populations to be integrated into the national political sphere and as the contradictory, confusing, unintelligible elements to be marginalized and returned to their alien origins. (4)

The *material* implications of this racialized politics of citizenship are significant. Anglo-America's "understanding" of the Asian minority (be it the "Yellow Peril" or the model minority stereotype) often constitutes the basis for discriminatory governmental and institutional policies on immigration, welfare, affirmative action, educational quotas and programs, employment, law enforcement, and community assistance and restructuring. The needs of Asian Americans and Asian immigrants, therefore are marginalized, made transparent (they are industrious and self-reliant, and can survive any adverse situation you put them in, without governmental assistance), or simply ignored (often as a result of a lack of political consequences). Therefore, to challenge Chinese (or any other ethnic) traditionalism marks an initial step one can take towards dismantling the Us/Them Orientalist binary opposition, disrupting racist Asian stereotypes, and mobilizing political forces to represent the rights of and address the needs and concerns of Asian America.

Coda: Reading "Return" in Chinese America

My historicization and subsequent problematization of the ideology of Chinese return are not intended to suggest its exclusivity as a problematic for peripheral Chinese Americans; in fact, most Chinese Americans have dealt with and continue to deal with return's interpellating logic, as is reflected in the various ways they have engaged the issue in their cultural productions. As a conclusion to this chapter, I will briefly survey its presence in Chinese American textual/literary history, which I hope will serve to highlight some of the common problems that are similarly faced by PCAs. Such a survey would also provide a point of departure from which to examine the different problematics and historical specificities that distinguish the PCA's experience from that of the Chinese American's.

Tu Wei-ming's point that any examination of return as an ideological formation should not be conducted in a de-historicized and de-contextualized fashion bears re-emphasis here (see note 43). Instead of conceptualizing Chinese return in a reductive manner, one should complicate it by analyzing its relationship to and interaction with the social, political, and cultural forces at work within its space of deployment. Chinese American literature, apart from functioning as a channel of artistic expression, also provides a means for emotional release and political reaction to a hostile and racist environment. Early Chinese migrant and Chinese American "texts," produced in the absence of publication luxuries and, hence, taking the form of talk-stories, poetry, and other oral traditions (frequently in the Chinese language), feature a longing for the Chinese homeland in their nostalgic recollections of home, a pining for wife and family, an expression of patriotic sentiments for a strong China, and a stoic determination to preserve Chinese culture from the "barbaric" influences of Anglo-America. The ideology of return, therefore, has been intertwined with reactions to the anti-Chinese climate in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America.

Serving as an example of the poetic responses to the discriminatory immigration policies and practices against Chinese immigrants, Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung have put together a collection of poetry written by Chinese immigrants—more specifically, poems carved on the walls of the detention camps on Angel Island, off the coast of California, between 1910 and 1940. These immigrants were held there for interrogation, which lasted for days and even months, all in the INS's hope to weed out "paper sons," immigrants who had forged evidence of relational ties to Chinese Americans, a legal loophole that circumscribed the exclusionary U.S. policy of admitting

only Chinese students and merchants. The need to return physically and politically was intensified as a result of the incarceration and humiliation suffered on Angel Island, as the following lines from some of the poems indicate:[64]

> I wish to go back to my motherland to carry the farmer's hoe (40).
>
> After experiencing such loneliness and sorrow, why not just return home and learn to plow the fields? (68).
>
> All my compatriots should please be mindful. Once you have some small gains, return home early (66).
>
> If my country had contrived to make herself strong, this would never have happened (86).

One could argue that these poems are situational and, hence, are not accurately representative of Chinese American sentiments on return. Many Chinese in America at the turn of the century, after years of failure to earn enough money so as to return home, abandoned themselves to their fate by psychologically disengaging from the hope of returning to China. But the "sojourner's mentality" still prevailed as the Chinese could not become citizens and were prevented from integrating into American society as a result of various forms of discrimination. As Marlon K. Hom notes in his introduction to a collection of Cantonese rhymes from San Francisco's Chinatown composed in the early 1910s, "the sojourner's mentality was also a product of anti-Chinese practices" for the "political and social policies [of the U.S. government] did not provide favorable conditions for the Chinese to establish families and to stay permanently in America."[65] The ideology of return, hence, sustained and intensified its appeal especially under such alienating circumstances. The following poem not only reflects the Chinese immigrants' sense of the difficulties and the transience of their stay in America, but it also engages the

ideology of return in its political, physical, and cultural dimensions, particularly in the final line of the poem:

> My friends, remember by all means:
> Don't let yourselves be stranded in a foreign country.
> Brows besieged by sorrow from frequent worries of home;
> Thousands of miles of clouds and mountains further impede a gloomy
>   stay.
> Separation brings out misery.
> Have your belongings always packed and ready.
> A journey to America is only a search for wealth.
> *Return to the old country quickly, to avoid going astray.*[66]

The earliest published works in English by Chinese immigrants were predominantly autobiographical or ethnographic in their intent. Writers such as Chiang Yee, Lee Yan Phou, Lin Yutang, and Helena Kuo[67] sought to portray Chinese culture and China in a positive light, frequently deploying idealized images of Chinese culture and civilization in all its rich tradition (normally that of the upper class) as a corrective to the negative views Anglo-Americans hold of the Chinese during that period. In describing some of these authors as "ambassadors of goodwill," Elaine Kim criticizes them for accepting "discrimination against the poor and uneducated members of their own race" and only "questioning the logic of discrimination against the educated elite."[68] Their desire to win American acceptance of their culture has led them to a return, in their writing, to a traditionalist portrayal of Chinese culture that neatly fits into the predominantly Orientalist conception of Chinese and Asians in the U.S. during this era of exclusion.

The popularity of autobiography as a genre among early Chinese immigrant writers such as those I have mentioned above and second generation Chinese Americans like Jade Snow Wong and Pardee Lowe attest to the significance of catering to the white

reader's ethnographic gaze of Chinese culture, especially in all its "traditional" finery and exotic flavors and colors. Works by Chinese Americans who seek to assimilate into Anglo-America function as safe "Chinatown tour guides," leading their readers into the dark, sin-filled, opium-infested alleyways of Chinatown. They provide descriptions of strange and exotic Chinese cuisine and traditional (hence, backward) social practices and customs. The goal is to show "contempt for things Chinese [by] alternating with repeated apology for Chinese or Chinese American culture and values and praise for everything 'American,'" in the attempt to win acceptance into Anglo-America by reproducing the binary logic of "China . . . [as] the symbol of backwardness, but America . . . [as] the epitome of modernity."[69] Though these authors were technically rejecting Chinese culture, they represented an inverted mode of cultural return in the form of self-Orientalism. In so doing, they seek not to glorify their culture but to reject it by seeking out the "worst" in order to feed prevalent stereotypes.

The post-Civil Rights era saw a growth in publishing opportunities for minority writing, ushering in a prolific output of Chinese American literature and film in a multiplicity of genres and tackling a broader spectrum of issues that reflect the complexity and heterogeneity of Chinese American identity, culture, and experience.[70] Contemporary Chinese American textuality has shifted its concern from submitting to the logic of assimilation to that of racial empowerment and ethnic pride, beginning with the works of authors like Frank Chin, Shawn Hsu Wong, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Jeffrey Paul Chan, whose efforts were directed at debunking stereotypes, unabashedly returning to ethnic roots, and "claiming America"—which Kingston proclaims is the purpose of her book *China Men*[71]—for Chinese (and Asian) Americans. In offering the strategic

potential for minority empowerment, this search for one's ethnic roots, unfortunately, may sometimes lead to the exclusivist danger of cultural essentialism, insiderism, and ethnocentricity, extreme positions upon which the ideology of return capitalizes.

Chinese American writing of the 1980s and early 1990s, in moving away from identity politics, as I noted at the beginning of the chapter, have mobilized a greater range of issues concerning Chinese America, for example feminism and Chinese patriarchy (Kingston and Amy Tan), U.S. imperialism and gay sexuality (David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*), and revisionist history (Frank Chin's *Donald Duk*). This is a positive and healthy step for Chinese America, as its literature has begun to address the complex human experiences that were marginalized in the earlier fights for literary representation. However, Chinese return has not, as a result receded in its relevance, but has instead maintained its presence in reconfigured formations. Diaspora and globality are newfound terrain for the ideology of return to entrench itself. The transnational opportunities of air travel provide a new sense of cultural connectedness to originary homelands, thereby allowing return to flourish as a myth of cultural rejuvenation: In Peter Wang's 1985 film *A Great Wall*, the protagonist Leo Fang and his Chinese American family visited his sister and her family in mainland China to return to the U.S. in a state of psychological, cultural, and spiritual refreshment. Jing-Mei Woo's trip to China to meet her long-lost half sisters, in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, generates an emotional catharsis and resolution in her struggle to connect with her mother and her culture—"I look at their faces again and I see no trace of my mother in them. Yet they still look familiar. And now I also see what part of me is Chinese. It is so obvious. It is my family. It is in our blood. After all these years, it can finally be let go."[72] Return has also re-appeared in a

familiar face, in the novels of Wang Ping, where China is depicted in a negative light, this time emphasizing the repressions of Communist China as a foil to an uncritiqued idealization of America as a land of freedom and opportunity.[73] In a similar vein, feminist critique of Chinese patriarchal oppression, productively and rightfully mobilized in Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, turns ugly in Tan's next book *The Kitchen God's Wife*, which unfortunately resorts to a sensationalized narrative of sexist violence perpetrated by monstrous male caricatures.[74] Instead of spotlighting the oppression faced by Chinese women, Tan's novel, in returning to a traditionalist depiction of a Chinese family in pre-Communist China in order to paint the atrocities committed against the female characters, problematically reifies and confirms Orientalized critiques by Western feminists of the deplorable and backward state of gender relations in "Third World" cultures.

It is crucial for me to point out that not all engagements with the notion of "return" have been negative. Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Hwang's *M. Butterfly*, for instance, are two major works, among many others, that effectively disrupt Chinese centrism by challenging cultural and genre boundaries (in Kingston's work), and in the use of reversals to problematize Orientalist discourses (in Hwang's play). Kingston's "memoirs" incorporate various elements from her life experience and purposefully blur the boundaries between cultural myth and cultural reality—she uses talk-stories, childhood memories, traditional Chinese folk tales, and movies, by reworking and interweaving them into a cultural tapestry—in order to question "what is Chinese" and "what is Chinese tradition."[75] In a similarly subversive fashion, David Henry Hwang in *M. Butterfly* takes advantage of the entrenched Orientalist depiction of Chinese passive

femininity and sexual submission to reveal the power relations involved in imperialist discourses on the East. What is so significant about Hwang's "return" to these traditionalist images of Chinese women is the role reversals that take place in the end of the play where the Orientalist image of Song Liling as Rene Gallimard's ideal butterfly is smashed, exposing the oppressive strategies of Western imperialism and Chinese self-Orientalism.[76]

My brief sketch of return in Chinese American texts brings me now to peripheral Chinese American cultural productions. Some of the issues, problems, and critiques raised in contemporary Chinese American literature and film are similar to those faced by PCAs. However, one must take into consideration the PCA's double marginality and a new set of problematics it raises in relation to the questions of diaspora, hybridity, postcolonialism, transnationality, class distinctions, and global capitalism. The rest of this project will engage these issues by using Chinese return not so much as a sole focus but rather as a stepping-off point to pursue different theoretical trajectories and critical readings. In Chapter 2, I will resume my discussion of the complicitous alliance return has formed with transnational capitalism through the former's transformation into a Chinese cosmopolitanism based on a link between neo-Confucian ideology and a Chinese economism. I will argue that the work of Indonesian-Chinese American Li-Young Lee, which will also be analyzed within this theoretical framework, opens up possible spaces for a critical alternative to Chinese cosmopolitanism. Chapter 3 features a reading of Marilyn Chin's poetic response to the Tiananmen massacre of 1989, and a look at Wayne Wang's latest opus *Chinese Box*, both attempts by Hong Kong Americans at cultural negotiation as they witness crises in the homeland(s). The multiply-inscribed identities

of PCAs also suggest the theoretical importance of hybridity and the challenge it presents

to Chinese return and cultural identity, a concept I will engage and problematize in my

reading of Malaysian-Chinese American Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Among the White

Moonfaces* in Chapter 4. And finally, Chapter 5 offers an opportunity for me to write

myself, as a Singaporean in diaspora, into this project by examining the notion of

political inertia through an analysis of Fiona Cheong's poetics of innocence in *The Scent

of the Gods*.

Notes

[1] William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1993). See especially Chapter 5, "Activists and the Development of Asian American Studies," which chronicles the links between early Asian American political activism and the subsequent formation of Asian American studies programs within the politically charged climate of these two universities.

[2] King-kok Cheung, "Re-Viewing Asian American Literary Studies," *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, Ed. King-kok Cheung (New York: Cambridge UP, 1997), 1.

[3] James Clifford, "Diaspora," *Cultural Anthropology* 9 (1994): 311.

[4] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990), 141-72.

[5] Arif Dirlik, "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism," *Critical Inquiry* 20 (1994): 351. In problematizing postcolonialism's complicity with global capitalism, Dirlik here connects the latter with the "global motions of peoples" in the past two to three decades.

[6] Congress extended this act in 1892, 1902, and indefinitely in 1904. Apart from the Chinese, other Asians were soon included in this exclusion: Japanese and Koreans (the "Gentlemen's Agreement" of 1907-1908), Indians (1917 Immigration Act), and Filipinos (the Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934). For a detailed account see Sucheng Chan, "Hostility and Conflict," *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (Boston: Twayne, 1991), 45-61; Paul Ong and John M. Liu, "U.S. Immigration Policies and Asian Migration," *The New Asian Immigration in Los Angeles and Global Restructuring*, Eds. Paul Ong, Edna Bonacich, and Lucie Cheng (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1994), 45-73;

Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (New York: Penguin, 1989), 3-18.

[7] Ong and Liu, "U.S. Immigration Policies and Asian Migration," 50-51.

[8] Ibid., 48. Of course, the authors are quick, and correct, to point out the irony of reading these events in counterpoint to the internment of Japanese Americans and the presence of racial quotas in subsequent immigration legislation.

[9] Paul Ong, Edna Bonacich, and Lucie Cheng, "The Political Economy of Capitalist Restructuring and the New Asian Immigration," *The New Asian Immigration*, 24.

[10] Ong and Liu, "U.S. Immigration Policies and Asian Migration," 52.

[11] Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Studies* (Durham: Duke UP, 1996), 60-83. Subsequent references to this text will be parenthetically documented. The chapter I am specifically referring to here is "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Asian American Differences."

[12] John M. Liu and Lucie Cheng, "Pacific Rim Development and the Duality of Post-1965 Asian Immigration to the United States," *The New Asian Immigration*, 74.

[13] On the question of Asian American panethnic solidarity, see Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1992). Espiritu takes up the issue of class in Yen Espiritu and Paul Ong, "Class Constraints on Racial Solidarity among Asian Americans," *The New Asian Immigration*, 295-321. The post-1965 professional immigrants tend to have difficulty identifying with the class struggles fought by Asian American activists during the Civil Rights era. The authors, hence, argue the need for Asian Americans to unite politically across class structures as "the welfare state bureaucracy treats Asian Americans as a single administrative unit in the distribution of economic and political resources, [and] it imposes a racial structure on persons and communities dependent on government support" (301).

[14] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 1.

[15] Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Hsu Wong, eds., *Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (Washington, DC: Howard UP, 1974). In the preface of this landmark anthology, the editors define Asian-American*ness* as a "sensibility" one acquires through birth, but add that one can also develop this sensibility by "choice." (ix-x) The problem with this argument lies not only in the definition of this "sensibility" but also in that it can lead to a hierarchy of Asian American cultural authenticity.

[16] Arif Dirlik, "The Asia-Pacific in Asian-American Perspective," *What Is in a Rim?: Critical Perspectives on the Pacific Region Idea*, Ed. Arif Dirlik (Boulder, CO: Westview P, 1993), 305.

[17] Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Immigration and Diaspora," *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, Ed. King-kok Cheung (New York: Cambridge UP, 1997), 290-91. The quotation is Lim's paraphrase of Wong's argument presented in a 1993 conference paper delivered at the University of California, Santa Barbara, entitled "Going Diasporic? Concepts and Constituencies in Asian American Literature."

[18] For the rest of this chapter, I will dispense of the use of quotation marks in conjunction with the word "peripheral" out of convenience. The quotation marks serve to problematize the category itself and the center-periphery paradigm upon which it is based.

[19] Lynn Pan, *Sons of the Yellow Emperor: The Story of the Overseas Chinese* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1990), 43.

[20] The gender specificity of the word appropriately highlights the fact that the Chinese population was predominantly male. The exigency of having to leave their wives at home in China was transformed and transcribed into a "gendering" of the racist legislative discourse for Chinese immigrants, as the "Page Law of 1875 and a later ban on Chinese laborers' spouses had effectively halted the immigration of Chinese women, preventing the formation of families and generations among Chinese immigrants." Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 11-12.

[21] Pan, *Sons of the Yellow Emperor*, 168-70.

[22] Arif Dirlik, "Culturalism as Hegemonic Ideology and Liberating Practice," *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, Eds. Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd (New York: Oxford UP, 1990), 394-431. Dirlik first problematizes the term and them reclaims it; I am thinking here of the former sense of the word, as a hegemonic "ideology which not only reduces everything to questions of culture, but has a reductionist conception of the latter as well" (395).

[23] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, Ed. Sarah Harasym (New York: Routledge, 1990), 158. Emphasis mine.

[24] Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993), 25.

[25] Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic*, 18-19. Spivak is here explaining post-structuralism's interrogation of the "limits" of the grand recits of the Western philosophical tradition and what they ultimately leave out in their narrative logic.

[26] The alliance between Chinese nativism and U.S. transnational capital I will discuss in Chapter Two, "Chinese Cosmopolitanism Critiqued: Critical Alternatives in the Work of Li-Young Lee."

[27] Quoted in "President Vows to Uphold Freedoms," *South China Morning Post* [online], 30 June 1997, available at www.hongkong97.com.hk/news.

[28] Rey Chow, "Can One Say No to China?" *New Literary History* 28, no.1 (1997): 151. Emphasis mine.

[29] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, Trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 259-60.

[30] Rey Chow, "Between Colonizers: Hong Kong's Postcolonial Self-Writing in the 1990s," *Ethics after Idealism: Theory-Culture-Ethnicity-Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1998), 154.

[31] The British-Hong Kong government chose Christopher Patten's term of office to institute democratic electoral reform, allowing the Hong Kong people limited participatory access to government. Such a move is not only belated but also smacks of tokenism that masks the contradictions between the argument for democracy/human rights and the exploitative basis of British colonialism and capitalism. For Patten's argument that democracy is crucial to sustain Hong Kong's economic viability and prosperity, see Jacques deLisle and Kevin P. Lane, "Cooking the Rice without Cooking the Goose: The Rule of Law, the Battle over Business, and the Quest of Prosperity in Hong Kong after 1997," *Hong Kong under Chinese Rule: The Economic and Political Implications of Reversion*, Eds. Warren I. Cohen and Li Zhao (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1997), 40. For a related and similar argument on the importance of "autonomy" for Hong Kong, as presented in a speech by Patten, see Christopher Patten, "The Implementation of the Joint Declaration: An Overview," *Hong Kong's Transition: A Decade after the Deal*, Eds. Wang Gungwu and Wong Siu-lan (Hong Kong: Oxford UP, 1995), 152-63.

[32] Dirlik, "Culturalism as Hegemonic Ideology and Liberating Practice," 415.

[33] For a calendar of events spanning the two days of the handover, go to *South China Morning Post* [online] at www.hongkong97.com.hk.

[34] "Hong Kong Handover Tugs on Student Heartstrings," *Herald Sphere* [online], 3 October 1997, available at www.netspace.org.

[35] Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997), 14-15. I will discuss the notions of liminality and disappearance at greater length in Chapter 3, "Crises in the Homeland(s): Hong Kong Americans and the Art of Cultural Negotiation."

[36] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996), 6.

[37] David Yen-ho Wu, "The Construction of Chinese and Non-Chinese Identities," *Daedalus* 120, no.2 (1991): 160.

[38] The rulers of the Ch'ing (or Qing) dynasty were basically Manchu, which the Han people viewed as not Chinese enough; hence, rebellions during this dynastic era assumed an anti-foreigner tone, an attitude compounded by resentment against British, French, Russian, Portuguese, and American trade, military, and/or, territorial intrusions.

[39] Prior to modern cartographic understanding, the land of China, in the minds of the Chinese, occupied a geographical centrality, which the following historical anecdote illustrates. In their attempt to proselytize the Chinese beginning in 1583, the Jesuit priests Michele Ruggieri and Matteo Ricci sought to impress the Chinese with European knowledge and inventions, which include European cartography. Their map of the world positions Europe at the center with the Americas on the left and China on the right. Obviously, it did not win popular approval among the Chinese. All it took was for the adaptive Ricci to reverse the positions of the continents in order to win the praise and acceptance the missionaries had hoped for. Immanuel C. Y. Hsu, *The Rise of Modern China*, 3rd ed. (Hong Kong: Oxford UP, 1983), 97-98.

[40] Pan, *Sons of the Yellow Emperor*, 10-12.

[41] Quoted in "Taipei Rejects 'One Country' Suggestion," *South China Morning Post* [online], 1 July 1997, available at www.hongkong97.com.hk. Beijing reiterated its call recently when Jiang Zemin, at a three-day, top-level policy meeting on the question of Taiwan, stated that "the reunification of the motherland should be accelerated." See "Jiang Calls for Reunification," *The Straits Times Interactive* [online], 14 May 1998, available at straitstimes.asia1.com.

[42] L. Ling-chi Wang, "Roots and Changing Identity of the Chinese in the United States," *Daedalus* 120, no.2 (1991): 183.

[43] Tu Wei-ming, "Cultural China: The Periphery as the Center," *Daedalus* 120, no.2 (1991): 17-18. Tu argues that to characterize Chinese diasporics as being drawn primarily "by the magnetic power of the homeland is simplistic. The reason that overseas Chinese rarely consider themselves thoroughly assimilated in their adopted countries is much more complex. In the United States, racial discrimination against the Chinese was, until recently, blatant; the Chinatown mentality, as a response to the hostile environment, may be seen as a psychological defense and adaptation."

[44] "Hong Kong 1997 Handover – Live on Internet," press release, 23 June 1997, The Chinese University of Hong Kong [online], available at www.cuhk.edu.hk.

[45] "Chinese Epic about Hong Kong Premieres in Beijing," *97 News File* [online], 9 June 1997, available at www.hk1997.china.com. The recent limited release of Chinese American director Wayne Wang's *Chinese Box* provides, if not an alternative, at least a Hong Kong American's take on the event. See Chapter 3 for my reading of Wang's film.

[46] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

[47] Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 21.

[48] Ibid., 7.

[49] Ibid., 22.

[50] Ibid., 36. In his seminal essay "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," which first appeared in *Public Culture* (2, no.2) and now forms a chapter in *Modernity at Large*, Appadurai theorizes on the "five dimensions of global cultural flows": ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes (33).

[51] Harry Harding, "The Concepts of 'Greater China': Themes, Variations and Reservations," *The China Quarterly* 136 (1993): 660.

[52] *Daedalus* 120, no.2 (1991), an issue entitled "The Living Tree: The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today," tackles the question of how the Chinese diaspora affects and is affected by the definition of Chinese-ness. Though a crucial and significant issue to address, I find somewhat befuddling the assumption of a homogeneity and an untainted wholeness to Chinese culture prior to contemporary diasporic disruptions.

[53] Tu, "Cultural China," 27. In referring to the "Third Epoch of Confucian Humanism," Tu does not explicitly endorse this movement, but reflects his sympathies with it by interposing the de-humanizing dangers created by *Western* modernity and technology.

[54] Leo Ou-fan Lee, "On the Margins of the Chinese Discourse: Some Personal Thoughts on the Cultural Meaning of the Periphery," *Daedalus* 120, no.2 (1991): 221. In discussing the political estrangement of Chinese intellectuals from the Chinese government after the Tiananmen tragedy, Lee theorizes this "China" by observing how "the Chinese nation, instead of the state, . . . remains the central object of their loyalty—their motherland." However, Lee's conceptualization of an imaginary "motherland," though intended as a means of critiquing Chinese political centrism, remains in its assumptions culturally centrist.

[55] Ibid., 215. For a discussion and critique of Chinese cosmopolitanism, see Chapter Two.

[56] Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia UP, 1995), 23.

[57] Quoted in "HK To Be Tolerant Society, But with `Chinese Values,' Says Tung," *South China Morning Post* [online], 1 July 1997, available at www.hongkong97.com.hk. Emphasis mine.

[58] Stuart Hall, "The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity," *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, Eds. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997), 178.

[59] I am thinking here of *Aiiieeeee!*'s editors' formulation of an Asian American "sensibility" (see note 15) in an attempt to differentiate between FOB (Fresh-off-the-Boat) Chinese and ABCs (American-born Chinese).

[60] Chow, *Writing Diaspora*, 6, 126.

[61] For an insightful and detailed account of the way the Chinese were stereotypically depicted (including some fascinating pictorial illustrations and photographs), see James S. Moy, *Marginal Sights: Staging the Chinese in American* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1993). Elaine Kim also offers an analysis of stereotypical caricatures of the Chinese and other Asian Americans in the literary work of Anglo-American authors such as Jack London and Mark Twain. Elaine H. Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1982). See Chapter 1 of Kim's book.

[62] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), 3.

[63] Malini Johar Schueller, *U.S. Orientalisms: Race, Nation, and Gender in Literature, 1790-1890* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1998), 4.

[64] Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung, *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940* (Seattle: U of Washington P, 1980). The numbers in parenthesis after each line represent page numbers and not the numbering of the poems in the book.

[65] Marlon K. Hom, *Songs of Gold Mountain: Cantonese Rhymes from San Francisco Chinatown* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1987), 62-63. These poems were culled and translated from anthologies of Cantonese folk rhymes. They represent the literary productivity of San Francisco's Chinatown, which often took the form of poetry writing competitions modeled after Chinese literary traditions.

[66] Ibid., 158. Poem number 76. Emphasis mine.

[67] Elaine Kim discusses only a few of these authors in *Asian American Literature*. For a more comprehensive list of women writers and their works during the period, see Amy Ling, *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry* (New York: Pergamon, 1990).

[68] Kim, *Asian American Literature*, 24-25.

[69] Ibid., 61, 63.

[70] For a brief introduction to and bibliography of contemporary Chinese American literature and its major contributors, see Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, "Chinese American Literature," *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, Ed. King-kok Cheung (New York: Cambridge UP, 1997), 39-61.

[71] Timothy Pfaff, "Talk with Mrs. Kingston," *New York Times Book Review*, 18 June 1980, 1. Also quoted in Kim, *Asian American Literature*, 209.

[72] Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* (New York: Ivy, 1989), 331.

[73] Wang Ping, *American Visa* (Minneapolis: Coffee House, 1994). See also her latest novel *Foreign Devil* (Minneapolis: Coffee House, 1996).

[74] Amy Tan, *The Kitchen God's Wife* (New York: Ivy, 1991).

[75] Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (New York: Vintage, 1976), 6.

[76] David Henry Hwang, *M. Butterfly* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1988).

CHAPTER 2
CHINESE COSMOPOLITANISM CRITIQUED:
CRITICAL ALTERNATIVES IN THE WORK OF LI-YOUNG LEE

Indonesia in Crisis: Race, Class, and Chinese Transnational Capital

Storm clouds of the Asian economic crisis began gathering early in 1997, culminating in the currency devaluation, stock market crash, and social upheaval in numerous Asian countries such as Thailand, Japan, South Korea, and Malaysia. Among the first few to encounter this economic onslaught was a particularly ravaged Indonesia, whose rupiah's downward spiral, coupled with the Suharto government's financial mismanagement and ironhanded rule, brought on the recent social unrest in the country: widespread retrenchment, high unemployment, famine, student and mass protests against the government, and the eventual (and long overdue) replacement of Suharto by his deputy B. J. Habibie (whom many consider to be a tolerable, though temporary, exchange for Suharto's thirty-year hold on power).[1] An especially horrifying part of this unrest is the ethnic violence directed at the Indonesian Chinese who are being blamed for their country's economic woes. Reports from Western and pro-Chinese media depict seemingly coordinated riots against Chinese businesses, the looting of Chinese-owned stores, and the rape of Chinese women; reports that are further intensified by the circulation of unconfirmed accounts and rumors on the Internet, graphically detailing the horrors of the anti-Chinese mob violence.

As shocked as one is by the accounts of these racially driven atrocities, the scapegoating and the "cultural cleansing"[2] of the ethnic Chinese come as no surprise; for anti-Chinese sentiments, unfortunately, constitute a recurring theme in Indonesia's colonial and postcolonial history. When the Dutch colonized the Indonesian islands, they encouraged diasporic Chinese to trade in the Dutch East Indies; hence, "for generations the Chinese lived *in* Indonesia but were not *of* Indonesia."[3] This perception of the Chinese as "outsiders" was exacerbated by the 1965 anti-Communist massacre, what one historian calls the "Indonesian Chinese 'holocaust,'"[4] where an estimated half-a-million Chinese lives were taken.[5] Indonesian Chinese were culturally and socially alienated and deprived of their rights when the government in 1965 banned the Chinese language, theater, and religious observances from public spaces, while Chinese schools were shut down by the 1970s.[6] As they were also denied a political voice in government, the Chinese turned instead to the task of money-making, hence finding security by dominating Indonesia's economy. Protected by Suharto (who obviously benefited from this alliance), the rich Chinese elite now control 70 percent of the country's wealth though the Chinese only represent 4 percent of the total population.[7]

With Suharto's political future in jeopardy, a consequence of the economic crisis, anti-Chinese violence began to erupt as early as January 1998. Resentment against Chinese wealth has been identified as the cause of the violence, though many suspect that the scapegoating of the Chinese and the rioters' deliberate targeting of Chinese businesses were orchestrated to shift attention away from the country's economic troubles and the governmental policies that led to the present crisis.[8] One commentator has noted pithily that the Chinese, by depending too much on Suharto, have "put all their

eggs in the economic basket,"[9] instead of finding ways to participate in Indonesian politics. On the other hand, one positive outcome of the ethnic violence is that it has mobilized some Indonesian Chinese out of their political apathy and inertia, to form the Indonesian Chinese Reform Party and other pressure groups to work towards political change.[10] Many have come to realize that ultimately economic prosperity cannot guarantee them a place in Indonesian society.

By reviewing the complexity of the Indonesian Chinese situation, I seek to problematize any hasty assignation of blame, which tends to reduce an overdetermined political/social problem to a simplistic oppressor-victim dualism. As much as one must forcefully condemn the racially motivated mob violence, the cultural terrorism visited upon the Chinese, and the Indonesian government's role in indirectly "sanctioning" such racism, one must also question the Chinese elite's complicity in creating a class-oppressive system where a rich minority of both native Indonesians and ethnic Chinese has amassed most of the country's wealth and resources, leaving a widening economic gap between the rich and the poor. To mobilize the Indonesian Chinese politically, as media commentators have suggested, is an important and crucial first step. But a conservative Indonesian Chinese politics will only further reinforce the present economic class structures; for though it may offer temporary solutions to the racial strife, it will fail to address the related underlying problem of class disparity. One must instead encourage a radical politics that not only mobilizes communal and national identification between Chinese and native Indonesian across religious[11] and cultural differences, but also critiques the role played by the Indonesian Chinese transnational capitalists in helping to

create and exploit a class oppressive (and often corrupt) system through the flexible accumulation of wealth, labor, and material resources.

The strategies of this elite class of transnational Indonesian Chinese exemplify what Donald Nonini and Aihwa Ong have described as "forms of power that collude with the contemporary regimes of truth and power organizing the new flexible capitalisms and modern nation-states, but also act obliquely to them, and systematically set out to transgress the shifting boundaries set by both."[12] These corporate elite Indonesian Chinese manipulate and work within the Indonesian regime of power to accrue wealth, frequently by developing a symbiotic relationship with the Suharto government in order to receive its "protection" and ensure its support. At the same time, the flexible strategies of accumulation offer the elite Chinese mobility and, hence, the possibility of escape, particularly in times of crisis such as the current climate of anti-Chinese sentiments and hostilities. With the early reports and rumors of anti-Chinese uprising, many rich Chinese had already fled to the safe havens of Singapore and other Southeast Asian countries, leaving behind the majority of the ethnic Chinese, who belong to the lower and lower-middle classes, to bear the brunt of the violence. The latter ultimately are the true victims of both racial violence and class oppression. As one Indonesian Chinese sadly testifies—and in so doing disrupts the stereotype of the rich ethnic Chinese—"I'm one of the have-nots. That's the role of the conglomerates: they can go abroad. The have-nots just stay here and take what comes."[13]

Contemporary Chinese Cosmopolitanism: Hegemonic Alliances

The Indonesian crisis, in this sense, foregrounds the complex social, economic, and political spaces, particularly within the Asia-Pacific Rim, that diasporic Chinese inhabit and from which they are deterritorialized. It also unveils the problematics of transnational culture and capital, as they intersect with the localized dimensions of race and class. Although I advocate complex readings of diasporic experience that engage local specificities, and resist reductive comparative analysis, the Indonesian situation presents significant insights into the U.S. "regimes of truth and power" that the Chinese, peripheral Chinese, and other Asian Americans have to negotiate and be subjected to. The complexity of the Asian American context similarly rejects the simplistic political dichotomy of oppressors and victims. Recent charges of illegal campaign contributions to the Democratic Party by Asian and Asian American donors illustrate this complexity.[14] With Republican politicians and conservative commentators crying foul, the issue of race enters the political and media discourse, just as it has in Indonesia. Images of the Chinese in America have been calibrated into xenophobic stereotypes that now transcend the former Cold War dualism of the good (capitalist) Chinese versus the bad (communist) Chinese,[15] to assume the new version of the unscrupulous and unethical Chinese transnational capitalist-exploiter, whom the Clinton administration has politically coddled for "Asian money,"[16] and who had in turn diverted wealth and jobs away from the American people. Such generalizations and stereotypes once again mask the reality of class distinction within a minority community through racial homogenization.

As is in the case of the Indonesian Chinese elite, what gets similarly highlighted here is the place of transnational capital in the culture and politics of Asian America,

especially when diaspora becomes an increasingly significant cultural trope to conceptualize the Asian American experience. To be able to critique the exploitative role played by modern Chinese transnationalism as it intersects with the discourses of global capitalism, Orientalism, Chinese traditionalism, and neo-conservative Asian American politics, I would like to turn to Chinese cosmopolitanism, a concept that has recently gained theoretical currency in transnational and Chinese cultural studies.

The questions of diaspora and globalization have begun to deterritorialize the notion of 'Chinese-ness" from its discursive roots within the former framework of the nation-state. Therefore, with the inadequacy of the center-periphery paradigm that has mainland China occupying the political and cultural center, sinologists and historians have started to rethink theories on Chinese culture to account for the growing significance of the Chinese diaspora in shaping Chinese modernity. Instead of completely destabilizing the center-periphery model, many of these scholars opt for a revised version of it, where Chinese diasporic culture becomes what Mike Featherstone has termed a global "Third Culture,"[17] which not only accounts for its transnationality[18] but also retains its peripheral position within the earlier cultural paradigm.

What is specifically "global" about this Chinese transnational culture is its links to global business and transnational capitalism. But instead of simply theorizing modern Chinese transnationalism as an Eastern auxiliary to Western capitalism, sinologists envision it as an equally (if not more) successful and more humane alternative. Hence, to explain the profitability and economic viability of Chinese transnational businesses, many "point to values like industriousness, trustworthiness, risk taking, and family cohesion" and the "cooperation and solidarity" generated by "clan and occupational

associations" as the reasons for success.[19] This form of *guanxi* capitalism[20] (based on familial, clan, and racial connections) deploys Chinese traditionalism and neo-Confucianism[21] to lend humanism and sociality—what Singapore's former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew characterizes as "the glow of Chinese fraternity"[22]—to the otherwise cruel world of late capitalist practices and strategies. The term "Chinese cosmopolitanism," therefore, invokes on behalf of transnationalism this humanism and sociality. Leo Ou-fan Lee notes that Chinese cosmopolitanism "embraces both a fundamental commitment to Chinese culture and a multicultural receptivity, which effectively cuts across all conventional national boundaries."[23] With greater philosophical grandeur, Tu Wei-ming argues that many Asian countries and "Chinese communities throughout the world have shown not only the relevance of Confucian ethics to their modus operandi but also the dynamics of the Confucian tradition in shaping their forms of life," hence producing "a new inclusive humanism with profound ethical-religious implications for the spiritual self-definition of humanity" that will ultimately affect cultural China.[24]

Aihwa Ong's critical work on the "flexible citizenship" of Chinese cosmopolitans constitutes an indispensable starting point in mobilizing any critique of modern Chinese transnationalism. In problematizing the "petty" orientalist discourse[25] of a racialized economism marked by "Chinese" values, Ong argues that Chinese "biopolitics" and neo-Confucian humanism, as structured within Chinese cosmopolitanism, mask the economic exploitation and class oppression engendered by transnational corporatism.[26] To demonstrate this, she traces the concept of *guanxi* from its deployment during the era of colonial capitalism to that of transnational capitalism:

> In everyday life . . . there is widespread misrecognition of *guanxi*'s
> violence, while its humanism is widely extolled by ordinary folk,
> businessmen, and cultural chauvinist alike. Such symbolic violence—or
> the erasure of collective complicity over relations of domination and
> exploitation—is also present in academic writings that unduly celebrate
> *guanxi* as the basis of recent overseas Chinese affluence. Misrecognition
> of business *guanxi* as basically a structure of limits and inequality for
> many and enabling of flexibility and mobility for the few to accumulate
> wealth is part of the ritual euphemization of "Chinese values," especially
> among transnational Chinese and their spokesmen.[27]

What Ong has also incisively demonstrated in Chinese cosmopolitanism here is Stuart

Hall's point that the global and the local are not antithetical and antagonistic formations

but instead constitute "the two faces of the same movement from one epoch of

globalization."[28] In her excellent examination of Hmong diasporic identification and

Miao political positioning, Louisa Schein also destabilizes the conceptualization of

"transnationalism and the 'nation-state' as mutually exclusive and as locked in

competition for paradigmatic primacy," by asking the question: "Why, instead, can these

debates not work toward imagining 'nation-state' and transnational as interlocked,

enmeshed, mutually constituting?"[29] On the strength of this logic, I would like to argue

that Chinese cosmopolitanism invokes both the global and the local by reformulating and

incorporating the "localized"/nationalist ideology of Chinese cultural *return* into a so-

called Chinese "global" economism. Frequently drawing on neo-Confucian principles,

advocates of Chinese cosmopolitanism identify "Chinese" values and work ethics in this

economism, hence successfully concatenating Chinese cultural traditionalism and late

capitalist strategies. Chinese centrism, therefore, has adapted itself to serve transnational

capital in a mutually beneficial relationship[30] and, in the process, has reasserted its own

political relevance and cultural hegemony within the Chinese transnational imaginary and

diasporic sphere.

This alliance between cultural conservatism and transnational capitalism accounts in part for the entrenchment of the kind of class oppressive systems one finds in Indonesia and increasingly in the United States. With the complication of racism and racial politics, the Chinese in both these countries realize the importance of political mobilization. However, the confluence of cultural elitism and transnational capital in Chinese cosmopolitanism, as it meets up with the need to confront racism, produces a neo-conservative politics that is willing to question the injustices of racial prejudice and racist crimes but refuses to confront the inequities of class differences, which Chinese cosmopolitanism only further reinforces. Glenn Omatsu exposes this contradiction in his analysis of Asian American neo-conservatism. As products of the Reagan-Bush era, these neo-conservatives "are children of the corporate offensive against workers, the massive transfer of resources from the poor to the rich, and the rebirth of so-called 'traditional values.'"[31] What Omatsu obliquely alludes to but does not extrapolate are the connections between Asian American "traditional values," Asian transnational culture, and global business. The figure of the Asian American neo-conservative, in this context, represents the problematic mobilization of minority politics without fully engaging in a critical fashion the intersecting discourses of class, race, and transnational capital.

Its alignment with late capitalism and conservative politics had liberal intellectuals shying away from the notion of cosmopolitanism, as Bruce Robbins notes in *Secular Vocations*.[32] Instead of relinquishing claim of the concept to his political opponents, Robbins offers a radical recasting of the term, an argument he takes up in the recently published *Cosmopolitics*, a volume he co-edited with Pheng Cheah. "Though cosmopolitanism is clearly an outgrowth or ideological reflection of global capitalism,"

he argues, "it remains possible to speak (in [Paul] Rabinow's phrase) of 'critical cosmopolitanism.'"[33] By registering cosmopolitanism as "a domain of contested politics,"[34] radical intellectuals should proffer cosmo*political*—to use Robbins and Cheah's play on the title—alternatives to challenge transnational capital's version(s) of it. Hence, one can envisage a "critical" *Chinese* cosmopolitanism as a theoretical mode of intervention that uncouples the links connecting Chinese traditionalism and neo-conservatism to transnational capitalism and, in the process, confronts the issues of class disparity and exploitation that are often elided in the postcolonial critique of racial, cultural, and political oppressions. In taking a step towards formulating such a notion of "critical" Chinese cosmopolitanism, the next section of my essay will offer a reading of the work of Indonesian-Chinese American poet Li-Young Lee as a route towards engaging these issues. I am aware that a political project of this scope cannot be adequately addressed by mere exegesis of literary texts; therefore, my interpretation of Lee—who is by no means radical in his political identification—serves only to tease out possibilities and positionings, albeit within the literary framework, to contest and disrupt Chinese cosmopolitanism and to foster further thinking on the formulation of critical alternatives.[35]

Winged Deterritorialization and Cultural Cannibalism: The Cosmopolitical Visions of Li-Young Lee

The poetry of Li-Young Lee, which has been compared to that of John Keats, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Theodore Roethke,[36] has earned him a place among Asian American literary figures of national standing. With two collections to his credit—*Rose* (1986) and *The City in Which I Love You* (1990), Lee has also recently published an

autobiographical work entitled *The Winged Seed: A Remembrance.*[37] Though much of his writing emphasizes his relationship to his father,[38] responses to his Christian upbringing, and a deep sense of connection to his wife Donna, Lee also retraces his steps as a diasporic Chinese and an immigrant to the U.S. By exploring the complexities and contradictions of being Indonesian, Chinese, and American, Lee's work elicits the same kinds of cultural and political questions the historicity of the present Indonesian crisis evokes. But instead of simply reinscribing textually his triple marginality (as an ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, as a diasporic Chinese, and as a minority in America), he finds in the cultural, racial, and class violence the possibility of human connectedness, a cosmopolitical vision that does not elide the violence and the oppression but foregrounds them as connecting links in bridging the world through its humanity. The two major tropes that Lee uses to enact this vision are the deterritorialized winged seed and the image of cannibalism as cultural incorporation.

The winged seed is a powerful botanical metaphor to describe the deterritorialization and global mobility of diasporic peoples in general. In fact, the term "diaspora" is derived etymologically from the Greek verb "to sow" or "to scatter," a concept borrowed from the dispersion of seeds by plants through various means such as water, wind, or animal/human carriers. Plants that employ wind dispersion such as the tropical *Angsana* tree often have built-in structures or wing extensions that enable their seeds to "fly" across vast distances. Li-Young Lee's use of this metaphor not only in the title of his latest book but also as the central trope around which he weaves his "remembrances" reveals its effectiveness in emblematizing both the trajectory of his own migratory history and the global scope and mobility of Chinese diaspora.

In a sense, the deterritorialized state of the winged seed is cosmopolitan in its production of multiple belongings, not unlike that of the flexible citizenship of Chinese transnational capitalists. However, to avoid the conservative celebratory gesture of the latter's cosmopolitanism, Lee reveals the mechanisms that enable (or force) diasporic flight and dispersion (frequently of the exilic type), hence unmasking the political violence and cultural nationalisms that marginalize, uproot, and displace groups of people into diasporic existence.

The story of Lee's diasporic flight begins in Jakarta in 1957 where he was born. Three years later his father was "charged with working for the CIA in plans to bomb military installations on the island of Java" and "for spreading discontent by preaching ideas from the West";[39] he was subsequently imprisoned for a year. Lee proceeds to detail the terrorism enacted upon Ba[40] and his family by President Sukarno's government,[41] hence fleshing out the tactics of social alienation, racial incitement, and ideological purging:

> While blueprints taken from . . . [Ba's] office only showed plans for classroom buildings, copies of certain letters proved incriminating enough for Sukarno to have him taken from his home by armed men. The squad of booted and uniformed men marching up our steps and the sight of four big army jeeps idling in our narrow street, which was barely wide enough for the coffer seller and the coconut peddler to pass shoulder to shoulder trundling their pushcarts, was enough of a signal to the entire neighborhood that we'd become pariahs. Anyone associating with us risked the same treatment. From that day on, even friends stopped coming by.
>   He was, of course, innocent from the start. My father was one of the most nonpolitical persons I've ever known. . . . But suspicion fell on him because, first of all, he was Chinese, and then because, as vice president of Gamaliel University, he'd invited a number of teachers and scholars from seminaries all over the United States to visit Jakarta as part of an exchange program, and he had on one occasion housed a minister from Ohio. Such associations while Sukarno was trying to ally himself with China and Russia could not be tolerated. (107-8)

Overnight, the Lee's were transformed into outcasts and, later, political refugees, as Sukarno's anti-Chinese purging intensified and expanded across the country. In Lee's own ominous words, "Escape was impossible, the purge had begun, weapons were being handed out to farmers as well as thugs, and all over the island, agents of the president were preaching the evils of Chinese and other foreigners. . . . What was obviously about to happen, chaos and killing, had already begun" (194). Ba's imprisonment strangely and fortuitously provided a channel of escape for the family. While being transferred to another prison in Macau, Ba escaped, with the help of a friend. The Lee family's exile brought them to Hong Kong, Japan, and Singapore (38), before they arrived in Seattle in 1964 (12) and eventually settled in East Liberty, Pennsylvania (78). Lee refuses to reify the U.S. as a paradisal political safe haven. Though physical endangerment was no longer a major concern in America, diaspora has translated the Lee's from cultural periphery (as Chinese minorities in Indonesia) to cultural periphery (as Asian Americans). In the U.S., the family had to cope with a different set of racial and assimilationist politics, one that was comparatively "benign" (vis-à-vis Sukarno's Indonesia) but no less violent in its mechanism of cultural oppression and alienation: while Ba, as a pastor of a church, cares for a congregation that labels him as their "heathen minister" (82), Lee himself struggles with the psychological trauma and self-doubt that inevitably come from failing to speak American English with the "correct" accent and pronunciation—"While some sounds were tolerated, some even granting the speaker a certain status in the instances of, say, French or British, other inflections condemned one to immediate alien. . . . More than once I was told I sounded ugly. My mouth was a shame to me, an indecent trench" (76).[42]

By briefly tracing his diasporic narrative above, I hope to demonstrate Lee's refusal to render the trope of the winged seed politically inefficacious through an uncritiqued cosmopolitanism and humanism. Instead, he unveils the various structures of oppression that litter the flight path of the diasporic. His cosmopolitical vision, however, does not "wallow," so to speak, in the self-pitying ethos of the victim mentality; but trancends it through the notions of potentiality and connectedness, which the winged seed seems to offer.

Lee's interrogation and exploration of the winged seed metaphor represent an internalized struggle on his part to negotiate between cultural risks and difficulties on the one hand, and hope, potentiality, and renewal on the other, as his description of a morning glory seed indicates:

> What is a seed? Is it its flower? Is it the leaves it utters? Is it a house? Where is the honey hidden, in which room? Where is the owner? How much room is a flower to a bee? Who could tenant a house so narrow as a seed? Only the least among us could live there. Lighter than the flower, it is where the flower closes at evening. Yet, in it may be growing the flower that will overthrow all governments of crows or senators. This seed comes to divide me from all I thought I knew. This seed revises all existing boundaries of an ungrasped hour. This seed carries news of a new continent and our first citizenship, and I hold it. (36)

> Soon, a seed will wake, who lay all night along a ledge. Meanwhile, I cradle in my hand this odorless seed like one dead, like one who recalls nothing of his actions or inactions, one who bears inside now only a remembered shapeliness of certain desires or need, but things more elemental, akin to oceans, sandstorms, and the yearning wings reveal by their action in time. (52)

The seed's power lies in its ability to collapse time and space into its diminutive casing, latently storing the possibility and promise of life. Rhizomic in character (according to Deleuze and Guattari's conceptualization of the term[43]), a seed deterritorialized is not only emblematic of the diasporic's humanity, but it also signifies his or her potential in

disrupting cultural and political boundaries and traditions—as Lee rather teasingly asks, what is it about seeds "that might so offend a military regime" or cause "dictators [to] fear?" (46). The seed, therefore, holds for Lee a cosmopolitical faith in humanity and the hope of new beginnings.

Furthermore, I would like to read *The Winged Seed* as a sort of "seed" narrative in its construction. Lee disregards, in a postmodern way, narrative conventions of chronological linearity and logical progression, but collapses time and space, as in the dense, compact interiority of a seed, by shuttling between "remembrances" which are weakly and spontaneously linked together by a succession of memory triggers. This technique allows Lee to form an intricate interpenetrating network of life experiences and possibilities, which does not just tropologically reflect the seed's life force but instead resonates its own.

It is possible, on the other hand, to read Lee's musings on the seed as a form of prelapsarian utopianism mediated through a sort of Third World primordialism or primitivism, a critique that many have justly leveled at the traditionalism and humanism of contemporary Chinese cosmopolitanism. However, a contextualized look at Lee's formulation of his cosmopolitical vision via the seed metaphor reveals that he is cognizant of the pitfalls, particularly the disadvantages of the metaphor itself and the way he deploys it. For instance, he observes how stripping the morning glory seeds of their "gold husk" reveals "blacker thoughts, the seeds!" (52), the lesson being that one must come to terms with human weakness and evil, just as one celebrates human strength and goodness. Lee is also painfully conscious of the biological/cultural determinism (as he is equally resistant to his parent's brand of Christian predestination) inherent in the very

physiological make-up of the seed, which the following passage depicting the seed's flight suggests:

> A seed, born flying, flew, knowing nothing else, it flew, and in that persistence resembling praise it took no respite. But its *natural* course was *inevitably* radial, away from its birth and into the second day, no frontier, and the seed flew through. . . . The seed's only companion was the *call* it heard at its ear, coming from its *birthplace*, realm of its first day, a call coming from behind it, prior, as it were, to the seed itself. (92; emphasis mine).

The inexorable call of "culture" leads Lee to pun on the word "seed" as sperm, thereby delineating a response to his Chinese-ness: "The age beginning with the Yellow Emperor continues through me, whose history is in my face, my undoubled lid and alien eye, whose future is a question forming between my thighs, . . . bed for seed" (95). One must acknowledge the benefits and revolutionary possibilities of cultural and ethnic identification; however, this must be tempered by a critique of essentialism, in this case that of the ideology of Chinese return, which I have engaged in Chapter One. Lee, in fact, views as suspect the notion of "blood" having claim on him just because it "was the oldest thing." He notes that Ba "felt clogged with it and damned with the talking about it" (175).

In the style of Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan, Lee weaves two tales, one about his paternal grandfather and another he hears from his grandfather's servant Old Asay told in the talk-story tradition, both of which Lee uses to subvert the primacy of blood and the idea of an unquestioning filial piety. Lee's grandfather is almost a caricature of patriarchal, sexist, and sexual violence. Practically the embodiment of evil and pure malice, Yeh Yeh (as Lee addresses him) is capable of matricide (a threat which enables him to gain control of the family wealth), spousal and child abuse (committed

through beatings or by denying his family food while he himself eats and his wife and

children watch in hunger), and sexual assault (visited upon Fei, Lee's sister). The latter

marks the limit for the young Lee, provoking him to swear "in . . . [his] heart of hearts . . .

[he'd] chop the old man up and feed him to the birds, and never go home" (175). Yeh

Yeh functions as a signifier in Lee's narrative of the oppressive elements within Chinese

traditionalism. Therefore, for Lee to express such hatred for his grandfather is to create

ironic moments within the text to undermine the call of "blood" to familial and social

conformity. Another such moment is found in Old Asay's telling of the clan feud

between the Shaw and the Lee families, both being arch rivals in the fishing industry in

China. She dramatizes in the heroic mode how each family had to select a "champion" to

contest and lay claim to certain territorial waters. What ultimately motivated these men

was the belief in defending their family name and honor, prompting each of them to

stoically plunge their "arms past the elbows into the boiling oil, and then walk home

unaided"; both becoming, as Lee editorializes, "sacrificial victims" to the cause of

"blood" and tradition (178).

  The way Lee complicates his reading of the winged seed metaphor prevents him

from settling too easily into a naïve humanism or uncritiqued cosmopolitanism. On the

other hand, by foregrounding the potentiality of the seed, he validates his cosmopolitical

vision, which he further accomplishes through the notion of a human connectedness that

transcends social, national, and cultural boundaries. This idea of connection forms a

thematic consistency in a series of stories and occurrences within the seemingly random

and serendipitous remembrances that structure Lee's seed-like narrative. What is radical

and politically effective about his concept of connectedness is that it dislocates the elitist

potential in humanism and Chinese cosmopolitanism by drawing instead on the solidarity and empathy felt between the marginalized and the oppressed, the "discarded lives" (81).[44]

Having just arrived in Seattle in 1964 and experiencing the trauma of displacement and alienation which migrancy bestows (through what Rey Chow theorizes as "a new ecology . . . of human-as-waste"[45]), the Lee family espies in a train station "a young woman in a trench coat and the baby in her arms, wrapped in the piss-sodden pages of a Spiegel catalog" (14), both of them emaciated by hunger and homelessness. Despite their own state of poverty and material want—two tins of butter cookies and sixty dollars are all that is left to feed the family of six till work can be found—Lee's mother offers an unopened tin and a sweater to the young woman and child, and even shows her how to feed the baby with freshly masticated butter cookies. Another instance of compassionate connection one finds in Lee's recollections of his father reaching out to "the 'other' members of . . . [his] congregation" whose liminality and marginalization from the social mainstream of the church resulted in their living "uncounted, discarded lives" (81). There is Mrs. Ethel Black whose family has abandoned her in her senility to a "soiled" and a "half crazed" state of existence (78-81); or Mona Cook whose prostitution and alcoholism have driven her to psychopathic hallucinations and violence (81-82; 84-85).

> [Ba] used to lie awake at night thinking about them, his prayers worrying God about this and or that person's misfortune or pain. I think he loved each and every one of them, and more than I ever felt they deserved, they who referred to him as their heathen minister, these alcoholic mothers . . . , delinquent children, shell-shocked bus drivers, pedophilic schoolteachers, adulterous barmaids, desiccated widowers, bruised prostitutes . . . , boring executives, retarded janitors, liars, cheaters, drinkers, dopers, motherfuckers, prodigals, sinners each and every one of us, and believers.

> Perhaps it was my father's calling to love every mangled or lost or refused
> soul. (82)

These stories and instances of human compassion and connection populate Lee's

childhood and imagination, and provide the "emotional accuracy" (123)[46] which enables

the production of an alternative cosmopolitical vision that is both humane *and* just.

      To complete my reading of Lee's cosmopolitanism, I would like to examine his

deployment of cannibalism as a trope for cultural incorporation. The concept of cultural

cannibalism has a theoretical legacy of critical intervention in Asian American literary

discourse. It uncovers the oppression and cultural violence of racism and assimilationist

rhetoric endured by Asian Americans. In discussing alimentary and quasi-cannibalistic

images in Asian American literature, Sau-ling Cynthia Wong warns critics against relying

solely on Western and Christian understandings of these images and proposes that by

reading them contextually and collectively (within the parameters of Asian American

textuality and experience), these images could "symbolize Necessity—all the hardships,

deprivations, restrictions, disenfranchisements, and dislocations that Asian Americans

have collectively suffered as immigrants and minorities in a white-dominated country."[47]

While Lee taps into this imagistic and tropological tradition by demonstrating how state-

sponsored terrorism, diasporic displacement, and cultural violations have "eaten" into the

lives of his family, he also directionally reverses the image in order to convey unity,

circularity, and connection. This two-fold deployment of the trope of cultural

cannibalism opens spaces for cosmopolitical possibilities, though not at the expense of

political critique.

      bell hooks argues that the commodification and "consumption" of the Other

provide a means of perpetuating "white racism, imperialism, and sexist domination"; "by

eating the Other . . . one asserts power and privilege."[48] Displacing this critical

understanding of cannibalism from its American context allows Lee to demonstrate its

applicability within the Indonesian setting:

> Mu was getting devoured. First, there was Ba's absence, which ate her
> daily, leaving her thin; her eyes stared and looked bruised, Fei recalls.
> And the other men ate her, the ones at every Administration doorway, the
> ones at the prison gates. Not only was her body becoming lighter, so was
> her purse, and eventually her house. One day a group of soldiers arrived
> in a truck to seize our belongings. . . . And then more men came, the ones
> dressed in shabby uniforms and sandals, wild, hungry-looking men who
> materialized all over the city, who capitalized on the chaos that was
> spreading all over the city. (116)

Lee's powerful employment of the above image—the cannibalization of Mu—speaks

voluminously of the persecution suffered by the Chinese and other opponents of the

Sukarno government. It interestingly also allows Lee to affirm the oppositional potential

and political legitimacy of the trope's conventional usage in Asian American literature,

before re-mobilizing it as a building block for his cosmopolitanism. Hence, cannibalism

and quasi-cannibalism begin to shift in their tropological valence towards notions of unity

and connection through one's humanity.

    In order to link the body physical to the body social, in his conceptualization of

cosmopolitical oneness, Lee directs his attention to the human body, immersing in all its

physicality, appetites, needs, functions, and processes. Particularly engaging and telling

are the passages in *The Winged Seed* that reflect Lee's persistent fascination with his

father's body, especially as the latter ages and approaches death. Because "in him [Ba]

was my beginning" and "from him I rose," Lee reasons, "naturally, his body interested

me continually" (181). Lee describes in excruciating scatological detail the ordeal of

having to help relieve a badly constipated Ba (invalided in his old age) by physically

extricating "the hard lumps" from Ba's body (158-9). As odious as this task is to him,

Lee is able to transcend his repugnance towards human waste, and to philosophize, rather

poetically I might add, on the proverbial circle of life:

> For shit's boon too, result of stomach, a self, and rank fire threshing bonds
> and forcing matter through base great changes, changing eaten stuff to life
> and death to be shat out in hot lumps looking nothing like us, yet, so us,
> utterly. And that smell in the air is what but dying? Nothing but perfume.
> Let us be singing the body passed out of the body, the evicted self, flesh of
> waste, for we are up from fire and straight to ashes. Where better for
> seeds than a residence of dung? Where better for flowers to be springing
> all but their secret: The dream color. Where is our true bed but this
> aromatic bread? We are bread. We should, like bread, be rising singing
> and, unlike bread, be knowing singing's ground, the tongue stuck in a cave
> of the cave-ridden, hive-laden, pitted, pocked body which shits itself, blind
> or disillusioned. The tongue, roughed up from shit, utters good vapors
> into magnificat. The sacrament is excrement, the true host is earth, peeled
> from us who are our guts and their furnace which make of impersonal
> bounties our Personhoods. (137-38)

The circularity of the imagery, in depicting the interconnectedness of all life, sutures

disparate and oppositional elements—food and excrement, ingestion and expulsion,

perfume and stench, life and death, the spiritual and the material—to create a monadic

world view that destabilizes the boundaries between the privileged and the discarded, the

individual and the cosmos.

This lesson that Lee learns from things elemental provides the philosophical basis

for him to emphasize the importance of cultural change, adaptation, and incorporation in

the calibration of a diasporic identity; and for him to extend this diasporic consciousness

into a secular, or worldly (to borrow Edward Said's critical formulation[49]), vision of

human oneness. On this final point, I would like to turn to a poem entitled "The

Cleaving," taken from Lee's second volume *The City in Which I Love You.* Here, Lee

reverses the "negativity" of cultural cannibalism, employs it in a way that reflects Stuart

Hall's conception of cultural identity as "a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being,'"[50]

and uses it to flesh out his cosmopolitical vision of connectedness.

The poem begins with the protagonist's visit to the Hon Kee Grocery to watch a

meat seller, who has "a sorrowful Chinese face,"[51] cut and sell roast pork and duck. He

becomes enthralled by the way the butcher violates the duck's carcass, a process which

Lee describes in graphic and yet sensual terms. Death, dismemberment, and eating are

intricately entwined:

> Did this animal, after all, at the moment
> its neck broke,
> image the way his executioner
> shrinks from his own death?
> Is this how
> I, too, recoil from my day?
> . . . .
> The butcher sees me eye this delicacy [the duck's brain].
> With a finger, he picks it
> out of the skull-cradle
> and offers it to me.
> I take it gingerly between my fingers
> and suck it down.
> I eat my man. (79-80)

After witnessing the violent cleaving of the duck and his complicitous but pleasurable

partaking of its body, the protagonist encounters a fish dealer and contemplates

cannibalism, where he would incorporate the butcher and the world around him into his

own sense of diasporic existence and cultural specificity:

> What is it in me will not let
> the world be, would eat
> not just this fish,
> but the one who killed it,
> the butcher who cleaned it.
> I would eat the way he
> squats, the way he
> reaches into the plastic tubs
> and pulls out a fish, clubs it, takes it

> to the sink, guts it, drops it on the weighing pan.
> . . . .
> The deaths at the sinks, those bodies prepared
> for eating, I would eat,
> and the standing deaths
> at the counters, in the aisles,
> the walking deaths in the streets,
> the death-far-from-home, the death-
> in-a-strange-land, these Chinatown
> deaths, these American deaths.
> I would devour this race to sing it,
> this race that according to Emerson
> *managed to preserve to a hair*
> *for three or four thousand years*
> *the ugliest features in the world.*
> I would eat these features, eat
> the last three or four thousand years, every hair.
> And I would eat Emerson, his transparent soul, his
> soporific transcendence. (82-83)

The physicality of eating, cultural eating, enables the protagonist to empathize and

connect with other Asian Americans, past and present, in a solidarity of marginalized

experiences. Although he, metaphorically or in actuality, has "swallowed," as Sau-ling

Cynthia Wong puts it, the "physical hardship or humiliation"[52] suffered by the early

Chinese immigrants, the protagonist is by no means stereotypically submissive and

passive (as evident in the model minority paradigm) in his "acceptance" of the anti-Asian

racism and discrimination. Instead of responding in kind through cultural nationalism

and essentialism, he envisions instead a more inclusive cosmopolitical unity:

> No easy thing, violence.
> One of its names? Change. Change
> resides in the embrace
> of the effaced and the effacer,
> in the covenant of the opened and the opener;
> the axe accomplishes it on the soul's axis.
> What then may I do
> but cleave to what cleaves me.
> I kiss the blade and eat my meat.
> I thank the wielder and receive,

> while terror spirits
> my change, sorrow also.
> The terror the butcher
> scripts in the unhealed
> air, the sorrow of his Shang
> dynasty face,
> African face with slit eyes. He is
> my sister, this
> beautiful Bedouin, this Shulamite,
> keeper of sabbaths, diviner
> of holy texts, this dark
> dancer, this Jew, this Asian, this one
> with the Cambodian face, Vietnamese face, this Chinese
> I daily face,
> this immigrant,
> this man with my own face. (86-87)

As he "embraces" the cleaving violence of the butcher's blade, he also welcomes the breaking down of cultural boundaries; not in the sense that he denies the oppositional and political usefulness of affirming differences in terms of race, gender, sexuality, and religion, but rather in that he sees the social and cultural multiplicity as a mosaic, heterogenous parts of a collective whole, connected in oneness through a common humanity. The ability of the protagonist, Lee's cosmopolitan, to identify with the Other makes his cosmopolitical oneness truly "global," vis-à-vis the cultural provincialism implicit in contemporary Chinese cosmopolitanism. On the other hand, one must also acknowledge that the celebratory imagery in this particular passage unfortunately can also camouflage dangers one finds in U.S. multiculturalism, where class inequalities and uneven power distribution are often made transparent, and where cultural diversity is frequently co-opted to further the hegemonic goals of transnational capital. These are the pitfalls that Lee needs to circumvent and to critique as he constructs a cosmopolitical vision that can in any sense be called "critical."

The political piquancy of Li-Young Lee's vision lies ultimately in his ability to push it to the theoretical edge of a cosmopolitical humanism in order to draw on its idealism, often without allowing it to fall off into the deep end of an uncritical liberal humanism—a humanism that conceptualizes the Euro-American experience as the universal norm at the expense of minority cultural identities. To keep in check this idealism, Lee unrelentingly excavates the different strata of cultural violence, political domination, racial oppression, and class exploitation. Hence, cultural cannibalism and incorporation (despite the possible dangers) demonstrate not just the idealized hope of unity and connection, but also the cultural and political violence emblematized by the butchering of carcasses and the protagonist's consumption of them. It is this two-fold approach of idealization and critique that renders Lee's vision a viable *starting point* for theorizing a radical alternative to the hegemony of contemporary Chinese cosmopolitanism and transnational capitalist culture.

Notes

[1] President Habibie's government is now facing a critical juncture in its tenure. In November of 1998, military troops and security forces clashed with student protestors, who were demanding greater democratic changes in the political system, the removal of the military from politics, and an investigation into the corrupt practices of former president Suharto. At least sixteen people were killed. "Hundreds March as Indonesian Parliament Promises to Enact Reforms," *CNN Interactive* [online], 18 November 1998, available at cnn.com.

[2] Michael Backman, "Blame Indonesia's Chinese?" *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 5 March 1998, 34.

[3] Jonathan Paris, "Minority Rules: How Indonesia's Chinese Can Survive," *The New Republic*, 13 July 1998, 21.

[4] Tu Wei-ming, "Cultural China: The Periphery as the Center," *Daedalus* 120, no.2 (1991): 19.

[5] Seth Mydans, "Indonesia Turns Its Chinese into Scapegoats," *The New York Times*, 2 February 1998, A3.

[6] David Yen-ho Wu, "The Construction of Chinese and Non-Chinese Identities," *Daedalus* 120, no.2 (1991): 166.

[7] Steven Butler, "Chinese Bear the Brunt of Anger," *U.S. News & World Report*, 2 March 1998, 51.

[8] John McBeth, with Salil Tripathi, "Playing with Ire," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 5 March 1998, 18-19. Though there is no evidence that the government is involved in the riots, Human Rights Watch believes that the government should shoulder part of the blame as it "failed to explain that high food prices and food shortages are not the fault of individual retailers" and "that the ethnic Chinese are a valued and important part of Indonesian society" (18).

[9] Paris, "Minority Rules," 20.

[10] Frank Ching, "Indonesian-Chinese Mobilizes," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 25 June 1998, 37.

[11] Islam is the state religion of Indonesia, while the ethnic Chinese are predominantly Buddhists and Christians. Though the religious differences multiply the cultural tensions between the two ethnic groups, as demonstrated in Li-Young Lee's *The Winged Seed*, Lee also offers in his text the possibility of connection and harmony in spite of these differences. See my discussion of Lee below.

[12] Donald M. Nonini and Aihwa Ong, "Chinese Transnationalism as an Alternative Modernity," *Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism*, Eds. Aihwa Ong and Donald M. Nonini (New York: Routledge, 1997), 20.

[13] Quoted in Mydans, "Indonesians Turn Its Chinese into Scapegoats."

[14] For a chronicle of the complicated relationship between the Clinton administration and rich and well-connected Asians and Asian Americans such as John Huang and James Riady (a wealthy Indonesian transnational capitalist), see John Kifner, "Clinton Advertising Plan Led to Asian-American Donors," *The New York Times* [online], 14 April 1997, available at nytimes.com.

[15] Aihwa Ong, "Flexible Citizenship among Chinese Cosmopolitans," *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation*, Eds. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998), 151. This is a revised version of her essay "On

the Edge of Empires: Flexible Citizenship among Chinese in Diaspora," *positions* 1 (1993): 745-78.

[16] David E. Sanger, "The 'Asian Money' Machine Stirs Old Fears in America," *The New York Times* [online], 4 January 1997, available at nytimes.com.

[17] Mike Featherstone, "Global Culture: An Introduction," *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity*, Ed. Mike Featherstone (London: SAGE, 1990), 1.

[18] Nonini and Ong have observed how modern Chinese transnationalism is a form of this "third culture." Nonini and Ong, "Chinese Transnationalism as an Alternative Modernity," 11.

[19] Gungwu Wang, "Among Non-Chinese," *Daedalus* 120, no.2 (1991): 140.

[20] Tu, "Cultural China," 6.

[21] Hung-chao Tai, ed., *Confucianism and Economic Development: An Oriental Alternative?* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute P, 1989).

[22] Quoted in Aihwa Ong, "Chinese Modernities: Narrative of Nation and of Capitalism," *Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism*, 179.

[23] Leo Ou-fan Lee, "On the Margins of the Chinese Discourse: Some Personal Thoughts on the Cultural Meaning of the Periphery," *Daedalus* 120, no.2 (1991): 215.

[24] Tu, "Cultural China," 26-27. "Cultural China" is used as an inclusive term for Chinese culture in a global setting.

[25] Ong, "Flexible Citizenship," 135.

[26] For TNC exploitation, see Masao Miyoshi, "A Borderless World? From Colonialism to Transnationalism and the Decline of the Nation State," *Critical Inquiry* 19 (1993): 726-51.

[27] Ong, "Flexible Citizenship," 139-40.

[28] Stuart Hall, "The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity," *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, Eds. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998), 169-70.

[29] Louisa Schein, "Importing Miao Brethren to Hmong America: A Not-So-Stateless Transnationalism," *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation*, Eds. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998), 169-70.

[30] This point also illustrates Stuart Hall's argument that capital does not negate particularity in its process of commodification but rather works through the specificities of culture, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. Hall, "The Local and the Global," 180.

[31] Glenn Omatsu, "The 'Four Prisons' and the Movements of Liberation: Asian American Activism from the 1960s to the 1990s," *The State of Asian American: Activism and Resistance in the 1990s*, Ed. Karin Aguilar-San Juan (Boston: South End P, 1994), 46. For Omatsu's excellent unraveling of the contradictory logic behind Asian American neo-conservative politics, see especially pages 42-50.

[32] Bruce Robbins, *Secular Vocations: Intellectuals, Professionalism, Culture* (London: Verso, 1993), 182.

[33] Bruce Robbins, "Introduction Part I: Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism," *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation*, Eds. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998), 7-8.

[34] Ibid., 12.

[35] My tentative approach towards defining (in rather reactive terms) a critical alternative to Chinese cosmopolitanism is indicative of the fact that "we do not yet have the knowledge or the discourse," as Paul Bove observes, "to deal with the TNC-world Miyoshi . . . summons as the nightmare fact of the global division of labor." Paul A. Bove, "Afterword: 'Global/Local' Memory and Thought," *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*, Eds. Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake (Durham: Duke UP, 1996), 380-81. Despite the "belatedness" of such critical work, one needs to press on in the search for fresh strategies in dealing with capital's present global hegemony, in the hopes of stumbling upon measures that will prove to be proactive instead of simply responsive to transnational capitalism's trajectory.

[36] See Gerald Stern's forward to Li-Young Lee's *Rose*.

[37] Li-Young Lee, *Rose* (Brockport, NY: BOA Editions, 1986); *The City in Which I Love You* (Brockport, NY: BOA Editions, 1990); *The Winged Seed: A Remembrance* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995). *The City in Which I Love You* was the 1990 Lamont Poetry Selection of the Academy of American Poets.

[38] John C. Hawley, "Gus Lee, Chang-Rae Lee, and Li-Young Lee: The Search for the Father in Asian American Literature," *Ideas of Home: Literature of Asian Migration*, Ed. Geoffrey Kain (East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 1997), 183-95.

[39] Lee, *The Winged Seed*, 107. Subsequent references to this text will be parenthetically documented.

[40] *Ba* is the Chinese version of "Dad," constituting a more casual form of address than "Father."

[41] Sukarno became the first president of a newly decolonized Indonesia in 1945.

[42] The politics of language and speech patterns is a problematic well laid out by a number of Asian American authors, hence highlighting its significance and importance to Asian American studies and activism. See especially Maxine Hong Kingston's "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe" in *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (New York: Vintage, 1976); Amy Tan, "Mother Tongue," *Asian American Literature: A Brief Introduction and Anthology*, Ed. Shawn Wong (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 40-44; and Traise Yamamoto, "Different Silences," *The Intimate Critique: Autobiographical Literary Criticism*, Eds. Diane P. Freedman, Olivia Frey, and Frances Murphy Zauhar (Durham: Duke UP, 1993), 127-34.

[43] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, "Introduction: Rhizome," *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987), 3-25.

[44] One is reminded of E. M. Forster's dictum here to "only connect," as articulated by Margaret Schlegel in *Howards End*. Forster's idealization of "personal relationships" as one of the tenets of his philosophical creed presented in "What I Believe," though heart warming in its humanism, falters into an elitism that has also plagued the liberalism of the Bloomsbury Group on the whole. See Edward Morgan Forster, "What I Believe," *Two Cheers for Democracy* (New York: Harcourt, 1951).

[45] Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993), 179.

[46] In a different context, Lee uses this term to describe the stories his Javanese maid-servants Seeti and Lammi told him while he was a little boy. What Lee found to be "true" is not the stories per se, but "the stories behind the stories that" convinced him "our island of cities and rice fields, forests, rivers, and volcanoes was The World" (123). I would argue that this constitutes the seed, the beginning, of Lee's cosmopolitical thought.

[47] Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993), 20.

[48] bell hooks, "Eating the Other: Desire and Representation," *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End P, 1992), 36.

[49] Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1983).

[50] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, Eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia UP, 1994), 394. Originally published in J. Rutherford, ed., *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 222-37.

[51] Lee, *The City in Which I Love You*, 77. Subsequent references to the poem from this volume will be parenthetically documented.

[52] Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature*, 37.

CHAPTER 3
CRISES IN THE HOMELAND(S):
HONG KONG AMERICANS AND THE ART OF CULTURAL NEGOTIATION

Hope lies within another country's semaphores.
The Goddess of Liberty, the Statue of Mercy. . . .
Marilyn Chin
from "Tiananmen, the Aftermath"[1]

Taking Sides?

Any discussion in the West about the fate of Hong Kong after 1997 inevitably

encompasses the words "democracy," "human rights," and "political freedoms" in its

discursive vocabulary, especially when Tiananmen Square 1989 functions for many as

the historical signifier that disturbs the narrative of Hong Kong's return to the motherland

and that unveils the ideological and political implications of the Chinese rule of Hong

Kong SAR (Special Administrative Region). In a recent conversation at a dinner party,

this issue was raised, and a Chinese friend of mine who was visiting the U.S. at the time

made the following observation: "I do not understand why Americans are so obsessed

with Tiananmen; in China, it is a matter of little significance to the rest of the country."

The debate that expectedly ensued was critically intense. But in a calmer moment of

retrospection (after all the dust has settled), I realize that what my mainland friend has

said unintentionally offers an aporetic space for one to (re)examine the public discourses

that swirl around the Hong Kong question and their impact on global and cultural

politics, especially for Chinese in diaspora. The obvious problem with my friend's

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statement is not that he questions the factuality of Tiananmen 1989 but that he denies or, more accurately, represses into his political unconscious its brutality and its reverberating and debilitating effects on movements that champion individual and political rights and freedoms in China. Therefore, in his mind, the massacre has been conveniently relegated to a footnote in Chinese history, explained away as a moment of youthful indiscretion and immaturity on the part of the student protesters. My critique of his position—which also happens to be the position adopted by the Chinese government—is a familiar and convincing one for many of us in the West. However, I would like to take a further step in unpacking the implications and assumptions nestled in my friend's statement, not just to explore the limits of its ideology but also to use it to interrogate the strategies of "democracy" as deployed by the West.

The place of "human rights" and "democracy" in U.S. public, media, and foreign policy discourses on China has been naturalized to the point where my Chinese friend's accusation of America's "obsession" would appear to us as misguided, illogical, or even politically motivated. Though his observation is ultimately flawed, what I would argue is that it helps one rethink the "logic" of democracy—something that we in the West take for granted—and to examine what this logic can mask. Hence, I would like to reinterpret this "obsession" as an effect of an Orientalizing discourse Rey Chow has characterized as the "King Kong syndrome," where China has been conceptualized "as a spectacular primitive monster whose despotism necessitates the salvation of its people by outsiders."[2] To avoid demonizing China, the West should accompany its criticism, especially in the case of Hong Kong, with a critique of Western imperialism; for without this critique, the rhetoric of "democracy" simply exposes, as Chow puts it, the "double standard" of the

West—any recitation of Hong Kong's colonial history will reveal Britain's naked aggression in precipitating the Opium Wars, a point which "the U.S. media habitually ignores."[3] In light of Britain's "eleventh-hour" attempt at democratizing Hong Kong, the West's insistence on "democracy" becomes glaringly hypocritical.[4] The language of "democracy" furthermore camouflages the exploitation and hegemonic manipulation of global capitalism, in an age where foreign policy works to protect transnational corporatism.[5]

On the other hand, one cannot deny that what is operative in my friend's attempt to distance himself (on behalf of all mainland Chinese) from America's "obsession" with Tiananmen, through articulating a homogenizing view of public indifference to the crisis, is a politics of denial which allows him to "cope" in complicity with the Chinese government's tactics of violence and suppression. The mechanism through which this politics is deployed is none other than a self-Orientalizing Us/Them binarism that reifies an East/West cultural division. This split constructs the "obsession" with Tiananmen as a metonymy for Westerners' selfish regard for individuality (as if social relations are of little importance in the West), while it nativistically brackets the East within the cultural inevitability of Asian social and familial ties (as if only the community and the nation assumed preeminence in the minds of the people, and personal rights and freedoms did not command any significance at all).

The violence that this binarism produces is not just epistemological, but it is also culturally, socially, and politically coercive. What it confronts diasporic Chinese with is a demand that they *take sides*, either to claim an Eastern sense of social "responsibility" and "stability" at the expense of political difference and individual voice, or to embrace

Western individualistic ways and, hence, to taint oneself culturally and to prostitute one's political soul to the schemes of Western imperialism: a choice of "double impossibility."[6] A way of circumventing and critiquing this binary logic is to negotiate a cultural and political space in-between these poles, a space in which I would like now to situate the problematics of Hong Kong Americans' diasporic consciousness and cultural/political identity negotiation, especially as they view the crises of their original homeland(s) from afar.

The difficult questions of cultural and diasporic identity asked by Hong Kong Americans are in ways no different from those of the average Chinese American[7]: What does it mean to be an ethnic Chinese in America? How does one grapple with one's Asian-ness and yet establish an American identity? How can Chinese (and other Asian) Americans come to terms with U.S. neo-colonialism, especially when the Asia-Pacific region is the theater where American imperialist adventurism is often played out? However, these contradictions that come to bear on Chinese Americans in general were compounded for Hong Kong Americans with the arrival of 1997, when the "postcoloniality" of Hong Kong in effect erases the former British outpost from the map of international relations. The notion of "homeland," as a result, becomes problematic when Hong Kong as a national (if I can even use this term) entity disappears and is incorporated into the larger polity that is mainland China. This event creates for Hong Kong diasporics a split vision of China/Hong Kong as imaginary homeland (which accounts for the parenthesized plural suffix "s" I have attached to the word "homeland(s)" in the title for this chapter). This plurality confers upon the notions of cultural and national origins a certain liminality for Hong Kong Americans as they

struggle with this double vision. What I am suggesting here is not so much the erasure of a material Hong Kong culture with the handover in 1997, but rather the intensification of a politics of subjectivity that the Hong Kong people and Hong Kong diasporics, including Hong Kong Americans, have to negotiate as Hong Kong itself shuffles between a British colonial legacy, a Chinese nationality, and a distinct but marginalized Hong Kong cultural identity. Hence, the notion of Hong Kong Americans witnessing the historical "crises" (as in Tiananmen Square and the 1997 handover) is crucial in my analysis, particularly in the way such events dislocate these cultural negotiations and throw into "crisis" the question of subjectivity.

A brief examination of the cultural and political scene that the Hong Kong people have occupied is critical in shedding some light on the Hong Kong American cultural identity predicament. Since the beginning of British rule, Hong Kong, the port city, has regularly been regarded "as a space of transit," a city of migrants who adopt what Ackbar Abbas calls a "port mentality," where "everything is provisional, ad hoc" and where "everything floats—currencies, values, human relations."[8] This feeling of transience was compounded by the British who, for imperialist reasons, minimized the political participation of the Hong Kong people, who could only channel their energies into the economic sphere, which is their "only condition of possibility."[9] Politically and culturally, many also see Hong Kong as "a borrowed place,"[10] which will one day be returned to China. These different sociopolitical factors contribute to a misguided belief (again premised on the Orientalist East-versus-West dichotomy) that the very idea of a *Hong Kong culture* is oxymoronic. This notion is based on the following logic: if China is the cultural origin and future of Hong Kong, one must then judge the authenticity of

Hong Kong culture against that of traditional Chinese "culture"; but since Hong Kong

has been so Westernized on the basis of its colonial history, Hong Kong culture cannot be

pure and, hence, must be rejected as illegitimate and insignificant. This line of reasoning

has led many locals to describe Hong Kong as "a cultural desert"—"Not that there was

nothing going on in cinema, architecture, and writing," Abbas explains, "it was just not

recognized to be culture as such."[11] In fact, this state of cultural liminality (as opposed to

cultural absence) also allowed the British to utilize Hong Kong as, according to the last

governor Chris Patten, "a bridge . . . between the West and China,"[12] without the British

government ever needing to commit itself to fight for Hong Kong's right of national

autonomy and existence after 1997. The argument is that since colonial Hong Kong has

only and always been a "borrowed place," culturally speaking, from China, the "absence"

of a legitimate autonomous culture disqualifies Hong Kong from the right to claim

postcolonial nationhood.[13]

　　　　The Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984,[14] which set the clock ticking towards

1997, basically awakened many in Hong Kong to the urgency of this question of culture

and nation, which Tiananmen Square only intensified and reiterated. In talking about the

inception of the new Hong Kong cinema, Abbas observes how historical crises help

initiate a paradigm shift in the cultural thinking and national perception of the people in

Hong Kong:

> The Joint Declaration caused a certain amount of anxiety, even though one
> of its terms is that the sociopolitical structure of Hong Kong will remain
> unchanged for fifty years (according to the slogan "One country, two
> systems"). But it also had another effect: it made Hong Kong people look
> at the place with new eyes. It is as if the possibility of such a social and
> cultural space disappearing, in the form we know it today, has led to our
> seeing it in all its complexity and contradiction for the first time, an
> instance, as Benjamin would have said, of love at last sight. . . . [The

> Hong Kong] public [became] suddenly anxious about its cultural identity because so many issues of social and political liberties hinge on that question. It would be that much harder for Hong Kong citizens to argue the case for political autonomy after 1997 if it could not make the case for cultural identity now.[15]

Abbas' exploration of the post-1984 cultural production in Hong Kong cinema, architecture, and literature reveals "a culture of disappearance" that reflects a strategy Hong Kong artists deploy to cope with the denial of their cultural autonomy by both Britain and China. As a mode of oppositional aesthetics, the notion of "disappearance . . . does not imply nonappearance, absence, or lack of presence," rather it is a moment of "misrecognition," a "pathology of presence," where representations of Hong Kong deploy techniques of "replacement and substitution"[16] and of "reverse hallucination"—of "*not* seeing what *is* there"[17]—to assert a Hong Kong cultural presence. More simply put, it is a sort of reverse psychology that uses representations of "disappearance to deal with disappearance."[18] It is a strategy that negotiates an in-between space through a destabilization of the East-West, China-Britain binarism that has dominated Hong Kong cultural politics and that has displaced any possibility for the legitimization of a Hong Kong culture. This strategy of disappearance, hence, gives Hong Kong culture "a critical edge, . . . a culture that interrogates the very nature of Hong Kong and explores the possibility of its redefinition."[19]

By shifting attention at this juncture to the cultural identity issue posed earlier regarding Hong Kong Americans, one can forecast a number of questions raised by the cultural and political struggles of Hong Kong: What difficulties or possibilities do these contested spaces of culture in Hong Kong pose for Hong Kong Americans, particularly when they have to deal with an unsettling double vision of China/Hong Kong as cultural

origin? Do these cultural spaces also offer strategies to resist Western imperialism (in the form of a past British coloniality and a present American neo-colonialism masked by the rhetoric of "democracy") and yet to challenge Chinese centrism (and its logic of cultural return)? How do these strategies help Hong Kong Americans critically tackle the trauma of witnessing the crises in their homeland(s) and, at the same time, present *radical* democracy as an alternative to its Western capitalist counterpart and as a challenge to Chinese authoritarianism? In an attempt to examine the problematics that these questions delineate, I would like to offer readings of the works of two Hong Kong Americans: Marilyn Chin's poetry on Tiananmen and Wayne Wang's recent filmic tribute to Hong Kong 1997, *Chinese Box*. The way these works grapple with "crises" is indicative of the demands and contradictions confronting cultural negotiation.

Ambiguities of Hope: Marilyn Chin on the Crisis in Tiananmen

The spilling of Chinese blood on Tianamen Square marks a terrifying moment of trauma for many diasporic Chinese, a moment that has precipitated an outpouring of artistic expressions to help articulate not only the pain and outrage but also a deep sense of national and cultural crisis that the massacre has inflicted. One of these artistic expressions is a series of poems entitled "Beijing Spring" in Marilyn Chin's second poetry collection *The Phoenix Gone, The Terrace Empty*.[20] What is significant about these poems is that they offer a glimpse into the complex world of cultural contestation and negotiation of a Hong Kong American, as she struggles to make sense of the crisis and its implications for the increasingly contradictory space she occupies between China and America.

By dedicating the segment "Beijing Spring" to "the Chinese Democratic Movement" (84), Chin establishes from the start that her sympathies do lie with the student protestors and the cause that they were fighting (and, in some cases, dying) for. However, she does not allow her political identification to be co-opted by a simplistic Us/Them binarism—democracy/communism, West/East, victim/oppressor, friend/foe. Instead, the Tiananmen crisis and its aftermath offer Chin the opportunity to bring into question the West's ideological "ownership" of democracy, which she accomplishes through the problematization of the cultural-ideological semiotics involved. Chin also engages the narrative logic of a Chinese utopianism as a means of exploring the contradictions of Chinese cultural and national identities. The established trope of the sexual/love relationship as national allegory also provides a useful and flexible metaphor for Chin to mobilize a two-pronged approach: she first deploys it to challenge China's violence against her own people, before tapping into its more positive and life-affirming aspects to shore up the political hopes and idealism deflated by the Tiananmen crisis.[21]

Chin defines the tone of her poetry beginning with the title of this series "Beijing Spring," about which I would like now to offer a few scattered interpretive observations. The concept of spring in Chinese culture is in many ways no different from its deployment in the Euro-American literary tradition, especially in its association with new life, new hopes, and new beginnings. But the localized specificity of a *Beijing* spring brings with it a certain contrary element of a lingering harsh winter. This cold is compounded by the bitter freezing winds that sweep through dusty Beijing streets, an image that contradicts and, hence, offers an ironic tension to the optimism of spring, creating what I would call the ambiguities of hope. Such ambiguities open up literary

and poetic possibilities for the depiction of loneliness and love lost, a point I will return
to when discussing the *poem* "Beijing Spring." For the moment, suffice it to say that the
ambiguities of hope signify a struggle on the part of Chin to come to terms with the
idealism and failure of the student movement in Tiananmen, the budding of political
democracy and its premature demise, and the energy of youthful determination and its
unfortunate dissipation the instant government tanks rolled over student bodies.[22] Hence,
a Beijing spring, when viewed through the political framework of Tiananmen Square,
becomes an ironic space where life and death, hope and despair simultaneously reside. It
is important, however, to note that it is not a space of paralysis for Chin, but instead an
in-between space of contradiction, contestation, and critique. Painful as it is for one to
occupy such a position, it has the potential to be an interventional space for cultural,
political, and national identity negotiations.

The ambiguities and contradictions involved in these negotiations characterize the
opening poem "New China," which I have quoted in its entirety below. Though it does
not deal directly with Tiananmen, this poem is important in that it appeals to an
attachment many diasporic Chinese have to the nation "China" as their cultural center;
this attachment is crucial in helping one understand the hopes and the despair that
Tiananmen as political signifier embodies:

> In youth I had nothing
> That warned me of heaven's vagaries
> My nature always was to love the hills and waters.
> Then, suddenly, I plunged
> Into the squalid pitfall, the world.
> Once having fallen
> It would be forty-two years—
> The worm must dig deeper now to find the light.
>   *   *   *

> Yet, my caged canary
> Yearns to sing in the forest.
> The fattened koi in my pond
> Dreams of the ocean.

> And I, their master, must one day set them free.
> No grief nor joy greater than this one. (85)

The title "New China" appeals to a Chinese utopianism that many Chinese and diasporic

Chinese hold to, a hope that "China" (however one wishes to define the term) may one

day regain its political and cultural glory. A "New China" assumes a certain mythic

quality that allows it to function as a nationalist rallying call. This "New China," hence,

becomes the fitting telos to the postlapsarian narrative that Chin sets up in the first half of

the poem. Here, the protagonist falls from a state of Wordsworthian innocence to come

face to face with the harshness and the difficulties of "the world;" she must then return to

"the light," the original glory, in order to attain salvation from her fallen state. Reading

this utopianism within the framework of Tiananmen produces further resonance and

complexity in its appeal. The title "New China" gains an ironic dimension—it is

precisely a new political China that the Tiananmen movement hopes to achieve; it was a

time of great hope and anticipation, as the participants of the movement believed that

their political mobilization had set the wheels of change in motion. However, their

idealism, which had energized the process, unfortunately also blinded them to the harsh

reality of the Chinese government's grip on power. The student protestors, therefore, in a

sense, have "fallen" from their political "youth" into "the squalid pitfall" that is "the

[Chinese political] world."

This interpretation of the first half of Chin's poem generates two troubling issues

that need to be addressed. Firstly, there is the danger of reading into this narrative a

fatalism (a form of pessimistic abandonment in surrender to "heaven's vagaries") that can induce political passivity in the people. Though there is inevitably a determinism set up by the redemption narrative, the telos of which is idealized as "freedom," as the second half of the poem suggests, human agency is still necessary to help accelerate the progression towards that freedom. Hence, there is a need to "dig deeper now to find the light," to continue the fight, to persevere, to develop new and more effective strategies of political resistance and change, in order to move the country towards the goal of political freedom and democracy.

Secondly, we can ask if by invoking the utopianism of a "New China," is Chin then guilty of reifying a form of Chinese cultural centrism? Although this seems to be a danger that is present in the imagery of this particular poem, I am hesitant to conclude definitively that this is Chin's position on the issue. For in other poems in the series, Chin appears to *challenge* the notion of racial and cultural purity, hence reflecting at least an ambivalence or ambiguity towards the nationalist calls of Chinese centrism. However, what is certain here is Chin's use of ambiguities as a means of complicating this narrative of political redemption, and a way of expressing her own *emotional* struggles with its contradictions.

The second half of the poem demonstrates how the story of political redemption is not a simplistic morality tale of the good guys versus the bad guys; it is a tale plagued by ambiguous positioning, contradictory affiliations, and uneasy alliances, attained through careful cultural negotiations. By shifting the protagonist's perspective to that of a "master" who must eventually emancipate her "caged canary" and "fattened koi," Chin focuses on the emotional conflicts of "grief" and "joy" that the master simultaneously

experiences. In identifying this contradiction of emotions, Chin is not attempting to relieve the Chinese government of the responsibility for its crimes; in fact, she is intimating that the master must accept the inevitability of the people's choice for freedom. Yet, at the same time, the master's ambivalence between grief and joy also represents opposing forces of cultural politics at work within Chin: how does one condemn the Chinese government and yet be able to understand the resistance that it feels towards the West's rhetoric of "democracy"? How can a Hong Kong American champion democracy without seeming un-Chinese, as many supporters of the Chinese government would assert? The false dilemma that undergirds these questions may be easy for one to disentangle logically, but the difficulty ultimately lies in the *emotional* resolution of these cultural "contradictions."

In the latter half of the poem "Tienanmen, the Aftermath," Chin takes up this issue once more by engaging the political semiotics that is part of Tiananmen 1989:

> Hope lies within another country's semaphores.
> The Goddess of Liberty, the Statue of Mercy—
> we have it all wrong—big boy, how we choose to love,
> how we choose to destroy, says Chuangtzu is written
> in heaven—but leave the innocent ones alone,
> those alive, yet stillborn, undead, yet waiting
> in a fitful sleep undeserved of an awakening. (88)

Between the months of April and July 1989, the students erected a simulacrum of the Statue of Liberty in Tiananmen Square, which they christened "Goddess of Democracy." Though the statue in this context was transformed into a Chinese symbol of freedom and democracy, it is ultimately still an American symbol, a borrowed symbol, reminding the Chinese that their hope of freedom still "lies within another country's semaphores." Hence, the patronizing figure of the West as the guardian and teacher of democracy

continues to retain its presence even in the shifting semiotics of the statue. In order to

challenge and disrupt the imperialist paradigm of a politically "advanced" (read

"democratic") West assuming the burden of teaching a politically "primitive" China the

principles of freedom and human rights,[23] Chin in a similar fashion concatenates the

Chinese Goddess of Mercy with the Statue of Liberty to create the chiasmic inversion

"the Goddess of Liberty, the Statue of Mercy," in an attempt to carve out an intersemiotic

cultural space for democracy in China. Yet, like the "Goddess of Democracy," the

awkwardness of such an inversion of symbols only reinforces the notion that "Western"

democracy is intrinsically incompatible with Chinese culture and tradition, hence the

need for the Chinese to borrow from the West its political ideals. Therefore, Chin,

through the protagonist, takes a further step in challenging this notion by concluding that

"we have it all wrong," and that we should displace the concept of political freedom from

the culturally coercive spaces of an East/West political semiotics, in order to ensure that

both Western imperialism and Chinese culturalism do not block China's path towards

democracy.

  To complete my analysis of Chin's cultural negotiations, I would now like to

consider the way she uses the trope of the sexual/love relationship to conceptualize the

nation China and its Others. The links between nationalism and sexuality/gender have

been well established,[24] and Chin selectively mines aspects of that critical tradition in

order to represent her complex negotiations of cultural identity. Of particular

significance is the trope of Nation-as-Woman. George Mosse points out that together

with "the idealization of masculinity as the foundation of the nation and society, woman,

often accused of shallowness and frivolity, was at the same time idealized as the guardian

of morality, and of public and private order."[25] For this image to work, the Nation-as-

Woman must be depicted "as chaste, dutiful, daughterly or maternal."[26] It is this

representation of the nation that nationalists would frequently invoke as the tropological

site for national demarcation and patriotic discourse, a point that Radhakrishnan makes

when he discusses the anti-Western logic in nationalist histories of postcolonial states:

> By mobilizing the inner/outer distinction against the "outerness" of the
> West, nationalist rhetoric makes "woman" the pure and ahistorical
> signifier of "interiority." In the fight against the enemy from the outside,
> something within gets even more repressed, and "woman" becomes the
> mute but necessary allegorical ground for the transactions of nationalist
> history. . . . Unable to produce its own history in response to its inner
> sense of identity, nationalist ideology sets up Woman as victim and
> goddess simultaneously.[27]

The shifting dynamics of the image of Nation-as-Woman allow it to denote

simultaneously the foundational order (as chaste Woman) and the vulnerability (as

victimized Woman) of the nation. These two dimensions work together to produce a

nationalist ideology that calls out to patriots to protect and defend the "chastity" of the

nation, lest she becomes a victim of enemy assault.

In the midst of national crisis and suffering, this image of the Woman as victim

also functions as a powerful device to evoke and signify nationalist feelings of anguish

and pain, and consequently to draw national solidarity. A case in point is fascist Japan's

infamous "rape" of Nanking during World War Two: the brutal rape and murder of

countless Chinese women by Japanese soldiers metonymically structure a nationalist

historical narrative of China's subjection to Japanese aggression.[28] (My goal here is

obviously not to detract attention from the real and horrifying brutality endured by the

Chinese people under Japanese occupation, nor the national humiliation and

encroachments China genuinely suffered at the hands of Japanese and Western

imperialism. Rather, what I hope to examine is how sexual and gender discourses are

mobilized within Chinese nationalist rhetoric to deepen anti-colonialist and anti-foreigner

sentiments during that time.) Rape, hence, serves as a disturbing but effective metaphor

for the territorial and cultural penetration of the land of China by Japan and Western

imperialist powers, which sought to carve it into different spheres of influence either for

outright colonization or for capitalist exploitation.[29]

Chin is clearly cognizant of the rhetoricity of the rape imagery and its ability to

generate anti-colonialist feelings. In "Tiananmen, the Aftermath," she appeals to these

feelings but then inverts the metaphor so as to turn the tables on the Chinese government:

> There was blood and guts all over the road.
> I said I'm sorry, darling, and rolled away,
> expecting the slate to be clean; and she came,
> she who was never alive became resurrected.
> I saw her in a dream . . . a young girl in a *chipao*,
> bespeckled, forever lingering. . . . (88)

The roles are now reversed with the Chinese government (occupying the subject position

"I" in the poem) being the victimizer instead of the victim. What is ironic here is the way

the metaphor of colonialist rape has been turned inward with the Chinese people

becoming victims of their own government's atrocities at Tiananmen. The students who

were massacred are represented as "a young girl in a *chipao*,"[30] who after being raped

and murdered returns to haunt her assailant with this troubling question: how can you (the

Chinese government) accuse the imperialist powers of "raping" China when you do the

same to your own people?[31]

While the rape metaphor enables Chin to condemn the Chinese government's

brutality and expose its hypocrisy, the notion of lovers on Tiananmen Square (a variation

on the trope of the sexual/love relationship as national allegory) provides her a path

towards political edification—to encourage and to build up once more the idealism that

energized the pro-democracy movement in the first place. This shifting between the

metaphors of rape and consensual love in her depiction of Tiananmen also reflects in a

way the conflicting need in Chin to both criticize and support China at the same time, a

contradictory position she negotiates, for instance, in the latter half of the poem "Beijing

Spring":

> Love, on Tiananmen Square, near the Avenue of Eternal Peace,
> I believe in the passions of youth,
> I believe in the eternal spring.
> As the white blossoms, sweet harbingers,
> pull a wreath around its city,
> as heaven spreads its blue indifference over
> the bloodied quay, I want to hold you
> against the soft silhouettes of my people.
> Let me place my mouth over your mouth,
> let me breathe life into your life,
> let me summon the paired connubial geese
> from the far reaches of the galaxy
> to soar over the red spokes of the sun's slow chariot
> and begin again. (91)

The passion between lovers is life-affirming and life-producing, which metaphorically

suggests the political optimism to "begin again." On the other hand, as I have noted

earlier regarding the title "Beijing Spring," the idealism is tinged with the ambiguities of

hope. Just as a Beijing spring offers for lovers the possibility of reunion, it also brings

with the remnants of winter cold depressing feelings of loneliness and love lost. The

"bloodied quay" and the "soft silhouettes of my people," hence, will continue to haunt the

Hong Kong diasporic's negotiation of a love-hate relationship with China.

Visualizing Hong Kong: Wayne Wang on the Crisis of the 1997 Handover

Despite the historicity of the British handover of Hong Kong to China on July 1, 1997, only two films were produce to commemorate the event: Chinese director Xie Jin's *The Opium War*[32] and Wayne Wang's *Chinese Box*.[33] The former is a 9.6 million dollar attempt by the Chinese government to "explain" the rightfulness of China's reclamation of Hong Kong and its territories from Britain, while the latter is a more ambivalent but no less problematic take on the Hong Kong question from the perspective of a Hong Kong American.

Director Wayne Wang has an excellent track record in the independent film industry here in the U.S., with his earlier films on Chinese American life such as *Chan is Missing* (1982) and *Dim Sum* (1984), an adaptation of Louis Chu's novel *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1989), the more mainstream *The Joy Luck Club* (1993), and his recent collaborations with Paul Auster in *Smoke* (1995) and *Blue in the Face* (1995). As all his earlier work deals with life in America, *Chinese Box* marks a filmic return for Wang to the place of his cultural and national origin, a return that enables him to grapple with the conflicting emotions produced by Hong Kong's coloniality and by Wang's own diasporic displacements. Leaving Hong Kong at the age of eighteen for the U.S., Wang has developed ambivalent feelings towards the place: "I love it because it's my home, it's Chinese, the food is great . . . But I also hate it because there's no history, nothing is kept, the air is bad. There is a certain aggressiveness about it that wears you down."[34] One can account for this love-hate relationship Wang has with Hong Kong by tracing the tensions and contradictions within the hybrid cultural space occupied by Hong Kong Americans. It is a hybridity inscribed by the cultural legacy of British colonialism, American cultural

imperialism, and a Chinese upbringing, producing a cultural schizophrenia that, as Wang

tells bell hooks in an interview, characterizes his childhood:

> I guess it was growing up in Hong Kong, being Chinese, living under a
> British colony, watching Rock Hudson and Doris Day movies, listening to
> *The Eagles* . . . I've always been, in a sense, on the border, because my
> parents were always very Chinese. At the same time they wanted me to be
> more American, more, you know, "Western." . . . So I have really been
> sort of schizophrenic and torn as far back as I can remember.[35]

Migrating to the U.S. only further intensified the complexity of this border mentality:

> When I go back to Hong Kong, . . . people say that I'm not Chinese; they
> say I'm American. I'm not Chinese like the people in Hong Kong or
> China. I was born and raised in Hong Kong, but I'm also completely
> bastardized by the English culture and the American culture. When I look
> at things I will look at them from both perspectives. It's unfair to say I'm
> not Chinese, because I am Chinese; I'm just not pure. But what does that
> mean today anymore, you know?[36]

Wang's struggle with the demands of Chinese cultural purity assumes greater

intensity and significance with the arrival of July 1997. For Wang the political crisis of

the homeland transforms also into a crisis of cultural contestation. Hence, while the

historicity of the Hong Kong handover provides an exciting, dramatic, and opportune

canvas for a film about his homeland, it also permits him a space to negotiate his

ambivalent feelings towards the place and basically to make peace with it—to offer "the

movie [as] a love letter to Hong Kong."[37] These negotiations also assist him in

confronting the contradiction of his own cultural identity, which one hopes will not result

in a resignation to the impossibility of "resolving" his cultural hybridity; but instead a

realization that hybridity offers the oppositional potential for destabilizing the coercive

cultural boundaries set up by cultural purism. Though the film at moments offer such

cultural critique, Wang's staging of the plot elements and his cinematographic framing

push this critique instead to an Orientalizing extreme, hence forcing one now to question

the ambiguous lines of affiliation and identification with Western imperialism that the movie sets up. In order to analyze Wang's problematic positioning, I would like first to examine briefly the movie's plot as political allegory and what it foregrounds and displaces. Then, I would turn to the question of cinematic visuality as a mode of the colonialist gaze, and the way Wang uses it to visualize his Hong Kong.

Let me begin with a synopsis of the plot in *Chinese Box*: John Spencer (played by Jeremy Irons) is a British journalist who has spent the past fifteen years covering the financial news of Hong Kong—knowing enough about his subject to even write a book entitled *How to Make Money in Asia*. He falls in love with Vivian (Gong Li), a former dance hostess whose "contacts" have helped her boyfriend Chang (played by veteran comic actor Michael Hui) establish himself as a rich and influential player in the business community. Vivian remains faithful to Chang despite the fact that he is unwilling to bear the social stigma and the economic consequences of marrying what traditional Chinese society would consider a "tainted" woman. While John is unhappy with Vivian's choice, his own world is further disrupted not only by the handover of Hong Kong but also by a personal crisis: he discovers that he has contracted a form of leukemia which gives him only a few months to live. Choosing to hide his illness from his wife, family, friends, and even Vivian, he embarks on a quest to get to know the "real" Hong Kong by videotaping the crowded streets and its denizens. This search leads him to discover how Vivian had earlier sacrificed herself for Chang, thus forcing John to confront both of them. When Vivian finally decides to leave Chang and reunite with John, she then hears of John's terminal illness. After spending the final days of the British rule of Hong Kong together

with Vivian, John lies down by a pier and expires on July 1, 1997, leaving Vivian behind with the strength to start her life anew.

The political allegory is all too obvious: John represents the dying British presence in Hong Kong; Vivian is the culturally "tainted" Hong Kong that China must now make her own but also deal with in terms of the seeds of democracy that had been planted supposedly by the British; and Chang is, of course, China, the traditional patriarch. To extend this allegory any further would be an inane exercise, as the allegorical correlation between signifier and signified will begin to unravel. It would be more critically productive instead to interrogate the assumptions and the consequences of Wang's deployment of this allegory. The first question that comes to mind is, What does it mean to narrate the Hong Kong crisis as a love story? Though the love relationship offers the kind of gendered hierarchy that emblematizes the power relations evident in Hong Kong's coloniality and postcoloniality—the submergence of Hong Kong's political and cultural presence beneath the British-Chinese transaction—and reflects the ambivalent feelings the Hong Kong people have towards their British rulers, the love story ultimately masks the exploitative agenda of British colonialism. To say that the colonizer does all he does out of love for the native is not unlike using the rhetoric of Kipling's White Man's Burden to justify imperialism.

Furthermore, the depiction of Hong Kong as a woman who prostitutes herself reinforces the idea that Hong Kong (according to the Chinese) has not kept itself culturally pure. At the same time, this metaphor also supports the idea held by many in the West that the Hong Kong people are overly materialistic and politically pragmatic, and lack the moral fiber to stand up for their own political rights. As one critic notes of

the love story's resolution, Hong Kong depends on Britain, even in its departure, for the strength to start anew:

> If the character's are allegorical stand-ins for their respective countries, what the film shows us is that, by dying, "Britain" forces "Hong Kong" to wake up from its long reliance on imaginary support. . . . Yet all is not lost: what was good of the old Empire, despite having drawn its last breath (i.e. John), is enough to send the reborn Hong Kong off in a brave new direction free of its ancestral moorings and illusory obligations—Vivian breaks up with her traditional boyfriend, knowing that he will never marry her, and takes courage from John's death to strike out on her own.[38]

In attributing her courage to John, Vivian, in the final voice-over of the movie, meditates on how she, "like the city, . . . [has] to start over again."

If this is Wang's way of coming to terms with the British Empire and Hong Kong's coloniality, and challenging Chinese traditionalism, it only generates questions rather than resolves the problems of colonialism's legacy. Suggesting that Hong Kong must now learn to stand on its own without Britain's support is to say that Hong Kong must assume the blame for her political immaturity, despite the fact that Hong Kong did not *choose* her colonial status in the first place! If the raison d'etre for Britain's colonial presence and final "death" is to encourage in Hong Kong independent political thinking through democracy, where then is democracy during Britain's more than 150 years hold on the territories? In other words, Britain conveniently waited till the approach of 1997 to promote (as tokenism) democratic thinking so as to valorize the Western rhetoric of democracy, when to do so any earlier would obviously contradict the very ideology and presence of Empire! Is Britain's "dying" in the end, therefore, a way of cementing the legacy of democracy in a colonialist nostalgic glow, which ultimately promotes the "benefits" of imperialist rule and relieves Britain of any further responsibility in moving Hong Kong along in its democratic growth or in offering the Hong Kong people the

alternative of British citizenship? What then is this "brave new direction" that Hong Kong is portrayed as taking when it can never be free from the "ancestral moorings and illusory obligations" when under Chinese rule? Nor can it be free to pursue this "virtual democracy," as Rey Chow calls it, which has been "hastily planted and left behind . . . like a land mine," producing "a political situation that was guaranteed to be a permanent source of irreconcilable conflict among the supposedly decolonized natives."[39]

Wang has questioned the legitimacy of political readings of his film and even the existence of allegory in it. "We don't make a moral judgment of any kind about the handover," he argues, "about whether it's good or bad."[40] In another interview, he denies the film's allegorical connections with the handover: "Some people have misread this as symbolism about the handover. . . . We did shoot a lot of real things that were happening during the handover, but this is a complicated love story. It's about the heart of the place."[41] The argument for apolitical art is, of course, fallacious, though Wang's denial of the allegory is still subject to debate. However, what I find intriguing is his formulation of the film as a treatise on "the heart of the place." Wang has suggested in yet another interview that "the movie is about the city of Hong Kong more than about a character and a story."[42] Stephen Holden of the *New York Times* confirms this by positing that "the film is essentially a poetic meditation on the meaning of Hong Kong. The characters' ambiguous personal histories are metaphors for the city, which in turn becomes a metaphor for the elusiveness of historical truth itself."[43] *Chinese Box*, therefore, becomes an ontological/epistemic excavation of Hong Kong through the techniques of cinematographic visuality.

The study of the cinematic gaze and its structuring of the subject/object relation is of great theoretical importance to the critique of cinematic Orientalist discourses.[44] The issue is one of power relations, where the cinematographer, in controlling the roving eye of the camera, also controls the framing of the object. Hence, film as an ethnography of the East allows the filmmaker to stage the object of study in Orientalizing poses, all in the attempt to "know" more about it. Cinematic visuality, hence, becomes "the law of knowledge and the universal form of epistemological coercion."[45] However, Rey Chow warns us against the danger of situating this problematic solely in terms of an East-West schema where only the West retains the power of gazing upon the East. She instead argues that the East is as capable of self-Orientalism through cinematic autoethnography[46] when "'the East,' too, is a spectator who is equally caught up in the dialectic of seeing.'"[47] The kind of self-Orientalizing primitivism that Chow pinpoints appears especially in Chinese films that are particularly popular in the West, which suggests that many of these filmmakers may be catering to the Westerner's gaze.[48]

In the case of the *Chinese Box*, whose and what kind of gaze has Wang adopted in order to "understand" Hong Kong, to "know" the meaning of the city of his birth? Is the film complicitous in perpetuating the colonialist mode of visual penetration? To answer these questions, one should first turn to Wang's use of a *double* gaze, where John Spencer's videotaping of the "real" Hong Kong, at certain moments, overlaps and telescopes into Wang's own framing of the movie, the two gazes becoming one. What then is John's vision of Hong Kong, and does it represent Wang's own quest to know Hong Kong in order that he might eventually come to understand himself?

The motivation for John's sudden desire to capture Hong Kong on film springs from personal crisis. His spiritual poverty, after years of writing about the material aspects of the city as a financial reporter, dawns upon him when he is faced with his own mortality. He then turns to Hong Kong in the belief that by understanding the city and its inhabitants, he can arrive at a better understanding of himself and his own existence. Together with Jim, his photographer friend (Reuben Blades), John scours the dirtiest and sleaziest parts of the Hong Kong streets in the hope that by capturing the darker aspects of the city he can also capture its essence.[49] As John puts it, "So much of Hong Kong exists beneath the surface." What results is a video montage in muted colors (images spliced in a jump-cut MTV style with a pulsating Canto-pop soundtrack which Wang adds for further effect) featuring disparate but often disturbing glimpses of the city's seamier underbelly, for instance prostitutes peddling their trade, workers in sweatshops, gamblers at the mahjong table shouting vulgarities, the abusive training of a scrawny fighting dog, butchers at work slaughtering various animals, and a special close-up of a freshly cut-up fish whose heart is seen beating its last (an image that is of particular significance to John as a signifier for Britain's and his own dying moments in Hong Kong).

John's videotaping exercise is essentially an Orientalist mode of staging the Other as a route to self-definition. As Edward Said argued almost two decades ago, the Orient is not only discursively constructed so as to justify Western domination of it; it is also formulated to help "define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience."[50] John chooses the dark, sensual side of Hong Kong, just as Joseph Conrad chooses the primeval in the Congo, as a journey into his heart of darkness.

The epistemic violence here involves not only a colonialist visual penetration but also a fixing (or more interestingly, fixating) on film a stereotypical image of Hong Kong in all its negativity, a visuality that unfortunately hides the lines of imperialist and capitalist exploitation that these images only hint at. Hong Kong, therefore, has been reduced to a tool to help one European man attain moral redemption.[51]

John's videotaping quest finally leads him to Jean (Maggie Cheung), a quirky individual with an unusual scar on her face who spends her time peddling strange wares such as bottled "colonial" air of Hong Kong. Jean becomes for John the elusive signifier, an embodiment of Hong Kong that escapes his ability to comprehend. In his fixation on wanting to get "her story," John insists on interviewing her, which she finally agrees only if she gets to frame her own interview (without questions from John) and to wield the video camera herself (a moment of agency?). She then proceeds to recount her life story on tape, a sordid, titillating tale of sexual abuse and castration, a tale that she knows her male audience would want to hear (a moment of self-Orientalism?). But she leaves out the crux of the interview: "What about the scar and how I got it," she asks in a stoic yet teasing fashion. "This is what I have to say about it. Nothing." The visual epistemic penetration of the camera interview ends in coitus interruptus, an anti-climax emblematized by Jim's question to John, "Did you fuck her?" John's desire to know about Jean is frustrated on a number of levels: she not only fails to reveal the source of the scar, but she is obviously telling a fabricated story of herself, which John is painfully aware of. Furthermore, when confronted with a newspaper cutting of her suicide attempt, Jean finally reveals how she was jilted by her British boyfriend and how she tried to end her life. John then arranges a meeting between Jean and her ex-boyfriend William, which

ends with the guy walking out on her again and a sobbing Jean rushing out of a stationary

bus she and John are in, leaving John with the cryptic and ambiguous "That wasn't

William." Jean, therefore, remains as enigmatic and inscrutable as ever to John, for her

parting words basically throw into question again the veracity of her story.

One more point about the agency of visuality that needs to be made is how Wang

(to his credit) allows the power of visuality to reverse itself momentarily as a way of

destabilizing the possibility of ever knowing Hong Kong completely through the

cinematic gaze. This reversal ultimately reflects his own realization of the hybrid cultural

space that Hong Kong occupies that defies culturalist definitions. It also undermines his

own attempt at self-knowledge through a search for the "real" Hong Kong. He

accomplishes this by allowing the reins of visual power to pass from John to Jean as she

videotapes herself in close-ups. As Gilles Deleuze explains, the facial close-up is an

"affective-image" that invites the viewer to ask questions: "what are you thinking about?

Or, what is bothering you, what is the matter, what do you sense or feel?"[52] What we get

in Jean instead is an impassive countenance that problematizes reading. To further

complicate matters is the way she wields the camera in a fashion that impressionistically

ruptures the visual framing: the face is rotated one hundred and eighty degrees, the image

is often tilted at odd angles, and one gets half-faced shots of Jean. This rupturing of the

frame and the destabilizing of images, hence, resist the violence of cinematic visuality's

staging of its object as a mode of domination through seeing and knowing.

The camera also returns to haunt John in two scenes. The first is where Jim

projects the image of Jean onto John as he leans against the wall. Jean's projected face

neatly overlaps John's, forming a single entity. The second is when John finally lies

down at the pier to die: the video camera rests on his heaving chest and produces an image of him closing his eyes and slowly slipping away. These two instances provide symbolic moments that demonstrate how the goals of both John's and Wang's visual/cinematic quest ultimately lie in the inward search for a resolution to the moral emptiness (John's) and the cultural contradictions (Wang's) that plague their respective souls.

To conclude my analysis and critique of the film, I must first credit Wang for his willingness to question the interrogatory power of film by allowing Hong Kong to continually slip from his grasp despite his attempts at immobilizing it within the cinematic frame. By conceptualizing it as a "Chinese box," which "[l]ike one of those Russian dolls . . . [that] can open layer after layer, but you still never know what's going to be inside,"[53] Wang may have incidentally succeeded in expressing the liminality that the Hong Kong people and culture have been relegated to in the scheme of Sino-British relations. On the other hand, Wang's staging of Hong Kong in his technique of visuality requires critique. If John's visual quest aligns with Wang's, is Wang then guilty of deploying an Orientalizing visuality to negotiate his own cultural difficulties? Maggie Cheung, the well-known Hong Kong actress who plays Jean in the movie, offers a rather ironic extra-textual gloss (especially in light of Jean's radical place within the film) on Wang's vision of Hong Kong: "Wang's point of view of Hong Kong kind of stayed in the 70's, or whenever he left. . . . I can't say it's not accurate, but for a local Hong Kong person, it's not really the life."[54] Though Cheung is referring to Wang's inappropriate use of a particular setting for the film, her point can be applied in a general sense to his vision of the place as a form of cultural atavism or nostalgia. Wang's Hong Kong,

therefore, is a staged or constructed imaginary homeland, to borrow Rushdie's terminology, that arises from his own remembrance and (mis)understanding of it. According to his vision, it is a city that cannot be pinned down culturally, symbolizing Wang's own struggle to come to terms with Hong Kong and its contradictions. Unfortunately, this vision can also serve to reinforce the cultural stereotypes of Hong Kong's "inscrutability" and to shift attention away from the very material culture and life of the Hong Kong people, which British imperialism and Chinese culturalism want the world to reject and forget. As John sadly muses, "I used to write about Hong Kong's future as if it had a definite direction and predictable outcome. But everything about this city is always changing; maybe I wasn't meant to figure you out." The figure of Hong Kong as the pragmatic shape-shifter, which can adapt itself to any political condition, is a logic that eliminates the political and cultural voice of the Hong Kong people, rendering it as inconsequential and dispensable—in other words, "Don't worry about them as they return to Chinese rule; they will survive through change and adaptation."

Finally, Wang's use of Hong Kong as an instrument to negotiate the tensions between East and West in his cultural identity crisis simply veers too close to being a replication of, firstly, the West's use of the Oriental Other as a means of self-definition (especially in light of Wang's deployment of John's videotaping quest in the film's narrative); and secondly, of Chris Patten's formulation of Hong Kong as a bridge between the West and China. The danger once more lies in Hong Kong's instrumentality, which has already led to the city's "disappearance" between the gaps of Sino-British relations and, as a consequence, Hong Kong's forfeiture of its right to a cultural and political existence.

Notes

[1] Marilyn Chin, "Tiananmen, the Aftermath," *The Phoenix Gone, The Terrace Empty* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 1994), 88. Subsequent references to poetry from this collection will be parenthetically documented.

[2] Rey Chow, "King Kong in Hong Kong: Watching the 'Handover' from the U.S.A.," *Social Text* 16, no.2 (1998): 94.

[3] Ibid., 97. The British allowed the Opium drug trade to flourish as a means of shifting the trade imbalance to their favor, at the expense of Chinese lives. Consequently, "gunboat diplomacy" was deployed to strong-arm the Ch'ing government into the treaties of Nanjing and Tianjin after the wars. For a summary of the events leading to the colonization of Hong Kong and its territories, see John Flowerdew, *The Final Years of British Hong Kong: The Discourse of Colonial Withdrawal* (London: Macmillan P, 1998), 3-15. One can turn to Frank Welsh, *A Borrowed Place: The History of Hong Kong* (New York: Kodansha International, 1993), for a detailed and colorful historical account, despite its verbosity and pro-British slant.

[4] Chow, "King Kong," 100.

[5] The fact of democracy's contradictions and ambiguities in light of British colonialism and China's recent turn to a capitalist economism is the concluding point that Chow makes: "Despite its moralistic overtones, the new narrative of global capital—the narrative that, to all appearances, wants to defend Hong Kong's democratic present against the encroachment of an absolutist China—is really interested only in the trajectory of Hong Kong's continual monetary growth, itself always said to be the . . . result of British colonialism. . . . With the emergence of global capital, the older narratives of British colonialism, U.S. imperialism, and Chinese nationalism no longer suffice to account for what is operating as a fluid, transnational, collaborationist structure of financial interests that, despite the ideological divergences of the parties involved, have as their mutually self-serving goal the prosperity and stability of the 'Pearl of the Orient.' In all likelihood, the struggle for democracy will always remain subordinated to this new fluid global structure" ("King Kong," 103-5).

[6] Rey Chow, "Between Colonizers: Hong Kong's Postcolonial Self-Writing in the 1990s," *Ethics after Idealism: Theory-Culture-Ethnicity-Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1998), 151. Chow uses the notion of "double impossibility" to describe Hong Kong's postcolonial situation where it is "as impossible to submit to Chinese nationalist/nativist repossession as it has been impossible to submit to British colonialism."

[7] I am aware that by using the categories "Hong Kong American" and "the Hong Kong people" in a context of engaging a Chinese cultural politics, I may be inadvertently and unintentionally homogenizing them as solely Chinese ethnic formations and, hence,

ignoring the minority elements within them, for instance, Filipinos, Indians, and various European groups.

[8] Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997), 4.

[9] Rey Chow, "Things, Common/Places, Passages of the Port City: On Hong Kong and Hong Kong author Leung Ping-kwan," *Ethics after Idealism*, 176. In addressing the materialism in Hong Kong, Chow criticizes the tendency of many scholars (including Abbas) to "lament and disapprove of Hong Kong's mercenary degeneracy" (176) despite the argument that "Hong Kong thrives economically *only* because it is lacking in political autonomy and self-determination" (170).

[10] This is the title of Frank Welsh's book on the history of Hong Kong. See note 3 above.

[11] Abbas, *Hong Kong*, 6.

[12] Quoted in Jeremy Tambling, "The History Man: The Last Governor of Hong Kong," *Public Culture* 9 (1997): 370.

[13] Ibid., 371. Tambling makes a similar point in his reading of Patten's metaphor of Hong Kong as bridge: "[T]he speech . . . is conferring an identity upon Hong Kong . . . by complimenting Hong Kong on being a bridge or a passage to China. Talking this way makes the place exist only instrumentally, as a means to open up Asia—and specifically China—just as the instrumental nature of Hong Kong in relation to Britain speaks also in the colonial power's attitude towards passports for Hong Kong people, whether in denying them or even in thinking that to issue them and suggest that people leave Hong Kong in a new diaspora could be a realistic solution taking into account people's actual wishes. . . . [T]he speech fails to allow that there might be a Hong Kong culture outside these terms which are so unselfconsciously using the territory as the image of a place to reconcile two essentialised opponents, reified as a unitary West and East. To acknowledge a Hong Kong culture would complicate that neocolonial dream."

[14] See Flowerdew, *The Final Years of British Hong Kong*, 32-52.

[15] Abbas, *Hong Kong*, 23.

[16] Ibid., 7-8.

[17] Ibid., 6.

[18] Ibid., 8.

[19] Ackbar Abbas, "Hong Kong: Other Histories, Other Politics," *Public Culture* 9 (1997): 304.

[20] See note 1 for bibliographical information. Chin's first collection of poetry is *Dwarf Bamboo* (Greenfield Center, NY: Greenfield Review P, 1987).

[21] Owing to the confines of my thesis, which focuses on "crisis," I am unable to explore at length Chin's use of the sexual/love relationship trope to critique its deployment in U.S. Orientalist discourses on Asian Americans. In the poem "A Portrait of the Self as Nation, 1990-1991" (taken from the same volume), which is reminiscent of David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*, Chin complicates her own "complicitous" place in the United States, especially as she negotiates the contradictions of cultural and national identity formation in the face of U.S. imperialism and cultural hegemony. An analysis of this poem deserves a separate essay.

[22] For an inside look at the students and intellectuals involved in the Tiananmen movement, see the documentary *The Gate of Heavenly Peace*, prod. and dir. Richard Gordon and Carma Hinton, 87 min. and 56 min., NAATA/CrossCurrent Media, two videocassettes.

[23] Recently, I witnessed a scene in a Chinese restaurant here in Gainesville, Florida, where an old white lady adopted a rather patronizing tone towards her Chinese server by confronting the poor young woman about Tiananmen and by instructing her, in a characteristically loud voice (as if by speaking thus her listener could understand English better), about the benefits of the democratic system in the U.S. What I find offensive is the attitude of superiority the old lady adopted in her attempt to "civilize" politically a young Chinese woman.

[24] See the groundbreaking work of George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1985). Another significant collection of essays is Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer, and Patricia Yaeger, eds., *Nationalisms and Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

[25] Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality*, 17.

[26] Andrew Parker et al., introduction to *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, 6.

[27] R. Radhakrishnan, "Nationalism, Gender, and the Narrative of Identity," *Diasporic Mediation: Between Home and Location* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996), 192-93. This essay appeared earlier in Andrew Parker et al., *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, 77-95.

[28] Lydia Liu, "The Female Body and Nationalist Discourse: The Field of Life and Death Revisited," *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*, Eds. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1994), 43-44. What I have dealt with here is only one aspect of the shifting imagery and ideology of Nation-as-Woman as it relates to China. For a more extensive discussion of the

complexity of this image in the historical and political discourses in China, see Tani Barlow, "Theorizing Woman: *Funu, Guojia, Jiating* (Chinese Women, Chinese State, Chinese Family)," which is also available in the above-mentioned collection.

[29] Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1975). Kolodny studies how in U.S. literary and historical discourses the land has been conceptualized as Woman. What is of special interest here is the way she uncovers the contradictions of this imagery where the land as virgin also entails violation and conquest. One has in mind, for instance, the colonization of Native American territories and cultures, the ruthless annexation of the northern parts of Mexico, and the destruction of ecosystems as America is extended from sea to shining sea.

[30] A *chipao* is a form of traditional Chinese dress for women. This traditionalism that Chin plays on is a significant foundational element in China's Nation-as-Woman nationalist rhetoric.

[31] Sexual assault as the metaphor for China's victimization of its ethnic minorities is also invoked in director Joan Chen's recent film *Xiu Xiu, The Sent Down Girl*.

[32] "Chinese Epic about Hong Kong Premieres in Beijing," *97 News File* [online], 9 June 1997, available at www.hk1997.china.com.

[33] *Chinese Box*, prod. and dir. Wayne Wang, 100min., Trimark Pictures, 1998, videocassette.

[34] Quoted in Scarlet Cheng, "The Homecoming," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 15 May 1997, 67.

[35] bell hooks, "The Cultural Mix: An Interview with Wayne Wang," *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 126-27.

[36] Quoted in Kristin Hohenadel, "A Human Face for Hong Kong's Identity Crisis," *The New York Times*, 19 April 1998, 38.

[37] James Sterngold, "Wang's World in a Love Story," *The New York Times*, 9 January 1998, B7.

[38] Wena Poon, review of *Chinese Box*, by Wayne Wang, *Film Quarterly* 31, no.1 (1998): 34.

[39] Chow, "King Kong," 100.

[40] Quoted in Cheng, "The Homecoming," 68.

[41] Quoted in Sterngold, "Wang's World."

[42] Quoted in Hohenadel, "A Human Face," 38.

[43] Stephen Holden, "A Meditation on the Meaning of Hong Kong," *The New York Times*, 17 April 1998, B18.

[44] The question of visuality is of special significance in Rey Chow's work. She engages the notion of a colonialist cinematic gaze in her critique of Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* in "Seeing Modern China: Toward a Theory of Ethnic Spectatorship," *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1991), 3-33. The self-Orientalizing mechanism of autoethnography in contemporary Chinese cinema Chow explores next in *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia UP, 1995).

[45] Chow, *Primitive Passions*, 10.

[46] This is a term that Chow borrows from Mary Louis Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

[47] Chow, *Primitive Passions*, 12-13.

[48] Ibid., 38.

[49] Scarlet Cheng observes that this film offers Wang a means of "showing some of the dark side of Hong Kong life." Cheng, "The Homecoming," 68.

[50] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), 1-2.

[51] Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays 1965-1987* (London: Heinemann, 1988), 1-20. In discussing the role of Africa in Conrad's novella, Achebe asks, "Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind?" (12).

[52] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986), 88.

[53] Quoted in Seth Faison, "Hong Kong Plays the Role of a Drama-Filled City," *The New York Times*, 1 July 1997, C12.

[54] Quoted in Hohenadel, "A Human Face," 38.

THE POLITICS OF POSTCOLONIAL HYBRIDITY:
THE MEMOIR OF SHIRLEY GEOK-LIN LIM

"The Native Daughter Made Good"[1]

The literary and critical work of Malaysian-Chinese American Shirley Geok-lin

Lim has firmly established her as a prominent and significant figure in the burgeoning

fields of postcolonial literature and Asian American studies. By making her mark first as

a poet and fiction writer whose imaginary vistas have transported readers from colonial

and postcolonial Singapore and Malaysia to the immigrant world of Asian America,[2]

Shirley Lim has garnered numerous awards including the Commonwealth Poetry Prize

(1980)—having the distinction of being the first Asian and woman to win the award—

and the American Book Award (1990). As an Asian American scholar, she has not only

situated herself in the middle of the critical dialogue on Asian American issues through

the publication of her theoretical essays,[3] but has also championed specifically the

writings of Asian American women.[4]

It is with admiration and encouragement that I look upon Shirley Lim and her

work, not just that she represents a happy "success" story of a fellow Southeast Asian

who has finally "made good" professionally in the United States, where an oppressive

climate of racial prejudice and cultural alienation has claimed many non-white migrant

casualties; but also that her fiction and poetry have a special resonance for me. One critic

likens the reading of Lim's recent memoir to "a journey of shocking recognitions,"[5]

which in my case is mediated through moments of ethnic, national, cultural, social, and critical identification. Firstly, the cultural and physical geography of Lim's fictional and autobiographical writings is familiar territory, as I myself straddle the national spaces of both Malaysia and Singapore through the family ties that I have in these two neighboring countries. Secondly, like Lim, I also lay claim, though to a lesser degree, to a Nyonya heritage—my paternal grandmother being part Nyonya and part Teochew.[6] Hence, Lim's depiction of the plight suffered by these Straits-born Chinese, whose racial hybridity (Nyonya being a result of Chinese and Malay miscegenation) has situated them in the direct line of fire of both Chinese chauvinism and Malay racial politics, is a reality that I have witnessed firsthand.

More specifically on the cultural politics front, Lim's work has often engaged the problematics of hybridity and diasporic discourses in ways that accentuate the oppositional and critical potentialities of these discourses. She critiques both assimilationist rhetoric and traditionalist culturalism, a double-edged emphasis that is crucial to my project on "peripheral" Chinese Americans thus far. As in the critical cosmopolitanism of Li-Young Lee (Chapter Two) and the liminal presence of Hong Kong Americans (Chapter Three), the hybrid subjectivities in Lim's fictional and autobiographical writings, at certain moments, exemplify Lisa Lowe's reformulation of postcolonial hybridity. Lowe argues that a critical notion of Asian American hybridity "does not suggest the assimilation of Asian or immigrant practices to dominant forms but instead marks the history of survival within relationships of unequal power and domination."[7] Such an understanding of hybridity Lowe uses to challenge Orientalist conceptualizations of Asian Americans, and to "refuse static or binary conceptions of

culture" as is evident in the coercive rhetoric of both "nativism and assimilation."[8] Yet, on the other hand, one is painfully cognizant of the fact that the critical possibilities of hybridity can often be overwhelmed and co-opted by the term's easy fit into the project of liberal multiculturalism, hence making transparent those very unequal power relations and class distinctions it is suppose to interrogate. Unfortunately, it is within the same critical spaces of hybridity and diaspora, which Lim privileges in her writing, that I find the aforementioned hidden danger.

Reading Lim's recently published memoir *Among the White Moonfaces*, therefore, has been for me a contradictory experience marked by both pleasurable moments of cultural and critical identification, and a general uneasiness fostered by Lim's problematic mobilization of hybridity and diaspora in the construction of her life narrative. What I hope to accomplish here is to produce a hermeneutics of ambivalence: a reading of Lim's memoir that will not just seek to celebrate the oppositional potential of the hybridity and diaspora discourses (though I will, to be fair to Lim, point out certain junctures in her text that reflect this, as the occasion permits), but will also present a critique of how these discourses serve to fuel and boost the careers of postcolonial academic intellectuals of which Lim's is a prime example. In the next section of this chapter, I will briefly examine some of the major critiques of postcolonial hybridity, which I believe will create an interpretive reference point for one to analyze Lim's construction of her memoir and the preeminent role hybridity plays as a force in propelling the memoir's narrative towards its inevitable conclusion.

Critiques of Postcolonial Hybridity

Hybridity and diaspora, both crucial tropes in the study of postcolonial theory, are closely interconnected terms; though how they actually relate to each other is subject to debate. For the purposes of argument, one could risk an oversimplification of the link between these terms by reducing it to a cause-and-effect relationship. Then again, which is the cause and which is the effect? For diaspora will inevitably produce some form of cultural hybridity, while one's sense of hybrid difference may help trigger diasporic displacement. Whichever is the case, my goal here is not to belabor this distinction but to emphasize the theoretical importance of hybridity as a site of contestation as it interacts with the concept of diaspora. What also becomes clear in a diasporic world that is rapidly being transformed and controlled by transnational capital is hybridity's smooth adaptation into capital's hegemonic deployment of multiculturalism.[9]

This critique of hybridity is one of Aijaz Ahmad's key arguments as he addresses the rise of postcolonial theory within the academy in the West. In his attempt to problematize the privileging of migrancy as the "ontological condition of all human beings"[10] that the Third World intellectual who lives in the First World is more conscious of, Ahmad turns to the writings of Salman Rushdie who depicts the migrant as a deterritorialized individual who has "floated upwards from history."[11] Rushdie reformulates this *historical* deterritorialization from what Ahmad calls the "myth of ontological unbelongingness" to create a "larger myth of *excess* of belongings." In other words, it is "not that he [the migrant] belongs nowhere, but that he belongs to *too many* places."[12] This reterritorialization—the migrant now occupying multiple national/cultural spaces—is a contradictory twist of logic in that Rushdie wants to

idealize the ungrounded interstitial hybridity of migrancy and, at the same time, cling to the intellectual/political advantage of being grounded in inter-cultural access and immediacy. Occupying both these theoretical spaces profits the Third World intellectual who resides in the First World. This is because hybridity hints of a marginalized subjectivity that supposedly marks one as having faced oppression; while "in occupying a multiplicity of subject positions and an *excess of belonging*,"[13] the Third World migrant intellectual/writer has "the ability to see at once from inside and out" which, according to Rushdie, "is a good thing, a piece of good fortune which the indigenous writer cannot enjoy."[14] In thus formulating migrant subjectivity, Rushdie privileges the migrant perspective at the expense of the "indigenous" and claims for himself (and other Third World migrant intellectuals) the enlightened voice of authority to speak on behalf of his culture. Or, as Ahmad so cogently puts it, "the figure of the migrant, especially the migrant (postcolonial) intellectual residing in the metropolis, comes to signify a universal condition of hybridity and is said to be the Subject of a Truth that individuals living within their national culture do not possess."[15]

The interplay between hybridity and diaspora that one sees in Rushdie is basically the argument that Homi K. Bhabha makes in his theory of hybrid in-betweenness. Bhabha similarly idealizes cultural hybridity as *the* postcolonial subjectivity that is situated in the "interstitial passage between fixed identifications" and as that which "entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy."[16] This trope of interstitiality allows Bhabha to posit the notion of the "unhomely" as the "paradigmatic colonial and post-colonial condition,"[17] articulated through modernist and postmodernist "discourses of displacement": travel, exile, migration, and diaspora.[18] By foregrounding

"unhomeliness" as the paradigm for the great expanse of historical time one calls

"colonial" and "post-colonial," Bhabha has given diasporic consciousness the ontological

primacy to be the *truly* postcolonial perspective. His notions of hybridity, in-

betweenness, and the "unhomely" ultimately feed into a kind of intercultural utopianism,

an idealized cosmopolitanism that, for Bhabha, evades the hierarchy that has so plagued

colonial and postcolonial cultural power relations:

> For a willingness to descend into that alien territory – where I had led
> you – may reveal that the theoretical recognition of the split-space of
> enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an *inter*national culture,
> based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures,
> but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity. To that end
> we should remember that it is the "inter" – the cutting edge of translation
> and negotiation, the in-between space – that carries the burden of the
> meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-
> national histories of the "people." And by exploring this Third Space, we
> may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves.[19]

I am not adverse to embracing a critical cosmopolitics (see Chapter Two), for it is

after all one of the goals of any radical politics; nor am I closed to hybridity's

oppositional possibilities, especially as a means of critiquing cultural traditionalism and

essentialism, a point I have indicated earlier. My discomfort with Bhabha's formulation

of the hybrid Third Space, however, stems from the way he inadvertently pulls the

political rug from under the notion of hybridity in his eagerness to circumvent "the

politics of polarity," hence denying it the opportunity of engaging a politics of resistance

and oppositionality. In trying to rescue it from political irrelevance within the cesspool

of multiculturalist and diversity discourses, Bhabha has instead accomplished what he set

out to avoid in the first place, which is to blunt hybridity's political edge to critique, for

instance, class hierarchies that often remain transparent in the postcolonial discourses on

race and diaspora.

This issue of power differentials underlies the main critiques of Bhabha's theories. Ella Shohat, for instance, warns us that a "celebration of syncretism and hybridity per se, if not articulated in conjunction with questions of hegemony and neo-colonial power relations, runs the risk of appearing to sanctify the *fait accompli* of colonial violence."[20] It is this danger of complicity that leads Aijaz Ahmad to expose the hegemonic links between hybridity discourses in literary postcoloniality and the imperialist impulses of transnational capitalist strategies. What Ahmad has difficulty accepting is "how the celebration of a postcolonial, transnational, electronically produced hybridity is to be squared with . . . [the] systematic decay of countries and continents, and with decreasing chances for substantial portions of the global population to obtain conditions of survival, let alone electronic literacy and gadgetry."[21]

This disparity in power and class relations is compounded by the *kind* of hybridity that postcolonial theory popularizes. As Arif Dirlik accurately observes, "[t]he hybridity to which postcolonial criticism refers is uniformly between the post*colonial* and the First World, never . . . between one post*colonial* intellectual and another."[22] Ahmad, in pursuing a similar line of critique, further situates postcolonial hybridity within the complexities of class and neo-colonial power relations in order to unearth the inequalities that this form of hybridity conceals:

> The entire logic of the kind of cultural "hybridity" that Bhabha celebrates presumes the intermingling of Europe and non-Europe in a context already determined by advance capital, in the aftermath of colonialism. In this account, non-Europeans hardly ever encounter each other and never without a prior European modulation of the very field of that encounter. Nor do these celebrations of hybridity foreground the unequal relations of cultural power *today*; rather, intercultural hybridity is presented as a transaction of displaced equals which somehow transcends the profound inequalities engendered by colonialism itself. Into whose culture is one to be hybridised and on whose terms? The wilful relegation of this question

> to obscurity reveals nevertheless that the underlying logic of this celebratory mode is that of the limitless freedom of a globalised marketplace which pretends that all consumers are equally resourceful and in which all cultures are equally available for consumption, in any combination that the consumer desires.[23]

Ahmad's maneuver here is needful in the way it reverses the de-historicization of hybridity that one sees in Rushdie and Bhabha, and re-contextualizes it within the history of colonialism and late capitalism. In drawing out these connections and, hence, implicating hybridity in the perpetuation of Euro-American racial dominance and of capital's global hegemony, Ahmad demonstrates that this mode of analytical critique is the first step towards reclaiming the term in order that one can re-calibrate it for deployment in a radical politics. Part of that step in one's encounter with postcolonial hybridity is to ask the sorts of questions that will help reveal and problematize the motivations, the alliances, the power relations, and the hierarchies that support or are being supported by the discourses of hybridity; questions such as, "who is mobilizing what in the articulation of the past, deploying what identities, identifications, and in the name of what political vision and goals?"[24] This process of contextualizing hybridity, hence, will inform my analysis and criticism of Shirley Lim's representations of her hybrid subjectivity in her memoir, and how these representations can ultimately be problematic in that they reinforce instead of dismantling certain power and class hierarchies.

A "Fugitive Presence" Determined

The setting is the 1989 Modern Language Association convention in New York City. Shirley Geok-lin Lim, who has just accepted a position to teach at the University of California in Santa Barbara, runs into Florence Howe, whose admiration for Lim's work

prompted the following declaration: "I want you to write a memoir."[25] What ensued in

that same conversation is equally if not more intriguing; in expressing how happy she is

for Lim, Howe articulates her interpretation of Lim's recent good fortune: "When I heard

you were moving from a community college to a university, I thought, at last, you were

being recognized. And I felt others were being recognized with you" (320). Though she

is aware that Howe's "outspoken support" is "mediated through class and institutional

grids," Lim still feels "moved" by the kind of feminist and minority camaraderie reflected

in her comment. This particular incident extracted from Lim's aforementioned memoir

Among the White Moonfaces is fascinating; for in a self-referential way, it subconsciously

points (via Howe's comments) to a possible purpose to Lim's writing of her memoir,

which is to tell a rags-to-riches story of one woman's rise from her humble Malacca

beginnings to that of a prominent intellectual and scholar, who now takes her "rightful"

place in a prestigious university in the U.S.[26] In a sense, this is the classic Horatio

Alger's narrative retold through the problematics of diaspora, race, hybridity, and

intellectual and institutional hierarchies. Though Lim is very careful to confront and

negotiate the contradictions in her story, one senses that the cultural and political

critiques scattered throughout her narrative are eventually overwhelmed by the master

narrative of the American Dream, a myth that Lim herself seems, ironically, to be critical

of. Lim's foregrounding of her own cultural hybridity, which is intended as a weapon

against U.S. assimilationist rhetoric and racist discourses, also unfortunately produces an

autobiographical narrative that reifies the very cultural logic it seeks to subvert.

    As an immigrant story, *Among the White Moonfaces* recounts the difficulties and

pains of displacement, culture shock, alienation, and rejection that a diasporic person

suffers. But more than that, it also depicts a journey of cultural, intellectual, and sexual awakenings and discoveries; a journey where the demarcations of self and community are alternately defined and blurred, and where national and cultural identities are constantly contested and negotiated not only in postcolonial Malaysia but also in the United States—a struggle that continues even after Lim, having endured years of cultural identity crisis, has finally and with much difficulty chosen to surrender her Malaysian citizenship in order to become a U.S. citizen. This journey is also Lim's paradoxical search for "home" despite her knowing that "unhomeliness," to follow Bhabha's formulation, will always be her ontological state of consciousness as a diasporic person and a cultural hybrid. On the other hand, this deterritorialized state is not unproductive in Lim's estimation, as it has helped to spur her growth as a poet, an author, and a scholar; an explanation that is reminiscent of how modernist discourses on exile and alienation have accounted for the creative geniuses of James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Joseph Conrad, and Henry James. These various threads of self-discovery and cultural identification eventually twine around the central tropes of postcolonial hybridity and diasporic displacement. In a sense, hybridity and diaspora not only determine Lim's choice of material in the construction of her memoir, but they also provide the propulsive force that in a deterministic fashion drives the linearity of Lim's narrative, hence producing the sort of conclusion that, in light of the factors involved, would be deemed "inevitable." It is this "inevitability" and its relation to power that I hope to interrogate.

In the subtitle of her memoir, Lim calls herself a "Nyonya feminist."[27] The Nyonya people, or the Peranakans, who are also known as the Straits-born Chinese, can often trace their ancestry to interracial marriages between fifteenth-century Chinese

merchants and the Malays of the Malacca Sultanate.[28] As Malay-Chinese hybrids, the

Peranakans occupy that "impure" cultural space of in-betweenness, thereby often

resulting in their marginalization within or exclusion from both Malay and Chinese

societies. Although her father is Hokkien,[29] Lim was brought up by her mother to speak

Malay, the language of the Peranakans, and to live according to Peranakan cultural

traditions. Therefore, it is understandable that Lim would identify more readily with her

mother's cultural heritage and racial hybridity. However, Lim's emphasis on the Nyonya

aspects of her background at the beginning of her memoir is also politically strategic in

that her hybridity offers her the perfect position from which to launch a two-pronged

cultural critique. Firstly, it permits Lim to question Chinese centrism and chauvinism:

"Chinese-speaking Malayans called me a '*Kelangkia-kwei*'—or a Malay devil[30]—

because I could not or would not speak Hokkien" (28); they were "hostile to peranakans,

whom they looked down on as degraded people, people who had lost their identity when

they stopped speaking Chinese" (70). Secondly, Nyonya hybridity also enables Lim to

challenge Malay discrimination against the Chinese in post-independence Malaysia:

> More and more, the term "Malay" appeared where "British" once stood.
> The "Malaysian," that new promise of citizenship composed of the best
> traditions from among Malays, Chinese, Tamils, Eurasians, Dayaks, and
> so forth, seemed more and more to be a vacuous political fiction, a public
> relations performance. . . . One group's empowerment appeared to lead to
> another's oppression. As a thoroughly English-educated mind, emptied of
> Chinese racialized sentiments, I was a mold into which the idealism of a
> progressive multiracial identity could be poured. Chinese chauvinism
> offended me as much as other racisms, for, although of Chinese descent, I
> was usually treated by Malayan Chinese speakers as foreign, alien, and
> worse, decadent, an unspeakable because unspeaking, degenerate
> descendent of pathetic forebears. But Malay chauvinism was no better.
> (188-89)[31]

This twin critique of Chinese and Malay chauvinism is a significant intervention in the context of Malaysian race relations. However, Lim's deployment of hybridity does not end here. What I believe she taps into and draws out of Nyonya hybridity is its biological determinism, which inevitably marks her from the beginning as a person with multiple cultural identities, having what Rushdie calls "an excess of belonging"; and it also inscribes her as a socially excluded and displaced individual. When Lim takes these implications of Nyonya hybridity and uses them to frame her memoir, what she has accomplished is to infuse the rest of her narrative with that determinism, hence accentuating the extent of her oppression in *both* Malaysia and the U.S, through the cry of "I do not have a choice but to _____."[32] This deterministic logic has allowed Lim to continue to construe herself as having "remained a renegade," "a fugitive presence which has not yet fossilized" (25), despite the fact that she has made a life for herself in the upper-middle class stratum of U.S. society and has landed a tenured professor position at a prestigious university.

It is essential at this point to qualify the assertions I have just made before expanding my arguments further. My critique of Lim's narrative thus far does not suggest my buying into the reactionary argument on responsibility and choice, a rhetoric that questions the existence of social, racial, sexual, and class oppressions, and that de-emphasizes progressive social and governmental policies by reifying solely the efficacy of personal choice and responsibility in the changing of one's lot in life. (This issue is complex and the answer probably lies somewhere in between social change and personal choice.) My critique also does not mean that I am denying the reality of Lim's experience—the oppressions perpetrated by the British colonizers in Malaysia, the neo-

colonialism of the British education system in the Commonwealth, the racial chauvinism and violence of both Malay and Chinese ethnocentrism, the racism and discrimination suffered by immigrants as they enter the U.S. all rightly deserve the kind of critique that Lim has engaged in in her memoir.[33] The difficulty I have with Lim's arguments lies in the way she constructs a formulaic migrant narrative that highlights moments in her life which reinforce the determinism in the trope of hybridity. This form of narrative construction, as a result, foregrounds the oppression but masks the privileges that hybridity brings to the Third World intellectual in the First World academy. Lim is conscious of her own class position, but unfortunately resorts to a token acknowledgment of it before circumventing the issue, hence permitting her narrative to become another retelling of the American Dream, though peppered, in contradiction, by moments of politically progressive critique.

The three points of contact I would now like to make with Lim's text are that of parental "mutilation," a racialized sexuality, and the notion of returning "home." An examination of these themes will expose the means with which Lim extends the problematics of Peranakan hybridity into other areas of her life experience in order to construct a narrative of inevitability.

Lim begins her memoir with an ontological lamentation of her excess of belonging: "Too many names, too many identities, too many languages" (20). The fact that she has too many names—not only Shirley, Geok-lin, and Lim, but also Agnes and Jennifer—is symptomatic of the competing and contradictory forces of Chinese culture, British colonialism, American cultural imperialism through Hollywood, and Roman Catholicism at work in the molding of Lim's childhood. But just as the onomastic shifts

signify the cultural violence and fragmentation these forces have wreaked upon Lim's life, they also implicate the role Lim's parents have played in conjunction with these forces to irrevocably mark her as a "renegade." As Lim reveals in the opening chapter, her "parents have . . . unwittingly mutilated" her (25); and if she had a "*choice* over . . . [her] history," she "never would have chosen" them to be a part of it (26; emphasis mine). The psychic and cultural mutilation her parents have subjected her to has led Lim to take on the burden of diaspora so as to "move . . . [herself] as far away from destitution as an ordinary human creature can," a move that takes her from "Malacca, a small town two degrees north of the equator, to New England, then to Brooklyn and to the rich New York suburb of Westchester County, and now to Southern California" (25). Hence, in the chapters that focus on her childhood and youth, Lim proceeds to demonstrate this lack of choice not just in the way her parents have treated her but also in the basic human need to "move from hunger to plenty, poverty to comfort" (25).

Part of the "mutilation" that Lim discusses can be seen in her father's choice of "Shirley" as a name for his daughter. Baba, as Lim would call him, is unconventionally "un-Chinese" (42), especially in the fact that he "was the only son to have taken a peranakan woman as his wife" and that he taught his children to speak English (41). He was particularly drawn to the various forms of Western media and entertainment, and has developed a deep fascination with Hollywood, an inclination that would compel him to name his daughter after Shirley Temple. Unfortunately, "Shirley" becomes the signifier for the identity crisis and cultural disjuncture that Lim as a child has to grapple with, particularly when the notions of racial difference and colonial desire fail to align themselves in her mind:

> "It's your dimples," Baba told me from the beginning. "You look just like
> Shirley Temple." I thought Shirley Temple was an untidy child, burnt
> brown, with straight black hair. . . . I know the details now: golden hair,
> blue eyes, Mary Janes on her feet. We could not have been more different
> as babies and little girls. But growing up I was assured that I was like
> Shirley Temple; a child star, reborn in Malacca, the glory atoms just the
> same. (17-18)

The contradictions in Lim's name only foretell the cultural fractures and

psychological trauma that await her. Her parents' marriage is already on the rocks, which

consequently will lead to Lim's alienation from her mother: "I have no memory as a child

of the kind of warm physical affection with my mother. . . . Emak appears in my child's

album as a self-absorbed driven creature, continuously pregnant . . ." (55-56). The

collapse of the mother-child relationship takes place when Lim's mother finally leaves

her family for Singapore:

> Maternal abandonment is unthinkable in human culture. Maternal malice
> marks a boundary humans can hardly bear to speak of, reformulating it
> instead into the wicked stepmother found in the Grimm brothers' fairy
> tales and numerous Asian folk tales. How then to understand my own
> mother, mother of six children, who picked herself up off the ground
> where my father had knocked her down, and left us forever? (56)

The psychic violence of maternal abandonment is compounded by the physical

violence of paternal anger, of course. (Though one must give Lim the benefit of the

doubt and must acknowledge the painful reality of child abuse, her formulaic reading of

parental discipline as physical abuse and psychic mutilation is a definite appeal to

Western perceptions and sensitivities with regards to child psychology and upbringing.

This example of Asian "child abuse" is a classic instance of self-Orientalism.) The fact

that Lim's father caned her brothers and her would eventually (and predictably) lead to

her own perpetuation of "the cycle of family violence" upon Gershom, her only son. The

shame that Lim feels and her "consciousness of one's own precarious position in the

cycle" are the main incentives for her to end the violence (306). Lim, therefore, has distinguished herself to her readers as the enlightened, Western-educated intellectual who has finally turned away from the "savage" and "primitive" practices of the previous generation.

The argument that Lim appears to be making thus far is that the alienation and displacement her Nyonya hybridity has produced are intensified by the cultural contradictions of her Asian-Westernized upbringing, the repression inherent in the colonial education system in Malacca, the double trauma of maternal abandonment and paternal violence, and the final "unspoken disintegration of . . . [her] family." Though these various fault lines have contributed to the fracture of Lim's cultural identity, they have also moved her "to rebellion and to literature" and, hence, helped her to define her "emergent sense of self as a poet" (120). The path has now been laid for Lim to take the inevitable step towards leaving home in order to escape poverty, repression, political and racial oppressions, and the painful memories of her childhood; and, more importantly, to shift herself through exilic displacement into a state of the "unhomely," of fugitive presence, as a means towards self-definition, poetic creativity, and intellectual expansion. Lim has thus succeeded in shaping an image of herself that is similar to the Modernist poets, whose exilic state of alienation and deterritorialization had led to periods of brilliant and intense literary output. On the other hand, she has also, as a consequence, situated herself within the similarly elitist space of aesthetic and class distinctions that these Modernist writers occupied, which in her case is further inscribed by institutional power and multiculturalist politics.

I would like now to engage in a brief analysis of Lim's memoir as a narrative of sexual awakening. Lim's emphasis on the theme of a racialized sexuality cannot be viewed in isolation but must be contextualized within the problematics of determinism and hybridity in order for one to visualize the connection. Maternal abandonment and physical violence, as Lim's narrative suggests, have not only scarred her emotionally but also sexually. For instance, the Electra complex shifts into high gear when Emak's leaving her family for Singapore clears a space for a particularly vulnerable and insecure Lim to occupy in close connection to her father. "As a child I adored my father's body," Lim confesses in a quasi-sexual manner. When the family goes swimming together, she saw her siblings and herself as extensions of her "father's confident body, . . . links in an unbreakable, undrownable chain, the meaning of my father's life made manifest to him" (58). When her father in anger physically punishes her for a vulgar sign she has rather innocently acquired, Lim, for the first time, sees herself defined as a sexual being in the eyes of her father. The fear and taboo of incest would ultimately lead to a further alienation between father and daughter, which is to culminate in her father's marriage to the family servant's daughter Peng, who is only seven years Lim's senior. What this produces in Lim is resentment towards her stepmother and revulsion at her father's sexuality, a consciousness of which is intensified by the sounds that penetrate the thin walls separating her from her father and Peng's bedroom. Lim writes, after an incident where she loses her puppy and where Peng points out "that Father's attachment to . . . [his daughter] was unnatural" (124):

> The unassuaged grief perhaps had as much to do with Father's betrayal as with the actual loss of a pup. After Peng's accusation I never felt the same way about Father. I was afraid of touching him. I could not bear to be near him. His body which I had loved as a child seemed possessed with a

> power of revulsion instead. He became a fully recognized sexual creature to me, and I abhorred his sexuality. (125)

This abhorrence assumes greater significance in the racialized fashion with which Lim would later define her sexuality and her choice of sexual partners. Her inclination towards non-Chinese males Lim attempts to justify through a psychoanalytic argument:

> I would never be able to feel sexual with a Chinese male because of the strong incest inhibitions that I had formed in my family. With eight brothers and troubled memories of Father, I could only feel familial about Chinese men: they drew me as strong companions and brothers or repelled me as tyrants or weaklings, but a bar was raised between my body and theirs beyond which I could not imagine. (170-71)

Her logic is flawed on multiple levels. But for the sake of conceding to Lim the integrity and sincerity of her assertion, I will just address the impulse of her statement as opposed to critiquing the intricacies of her argument. The question that first comes to mind is, why is there a need for Lim to justify her sexual choices in the first place? In other words, her preference for non-Chinese men is simply a personal preference. One possible reason could be that this is a preemptive strike launched to counteract the accusations of racial betrayal Chinese chauvinists might hurl at her. In a later passage, Lim justifies again her choices by theorizing that in reaction to the "competition for dominance between Chinese and Malay elites, [she] . . . was attracted contrarily to Eurasians and Indians, a romance of minoritism, as a way out of the fixedness of race identity" (189). Though she attempts to inject political oppositionality in this version of her explanations, the notion of political *choice* here contradicts and undermines the determinism of the psychoanalytic interpretation she has offered earlier, a point which I will explore next.

Lim's psychoanalytic justification basically works towards reinforcing the notion of determinism that runs throughout her text. By placing the burden of her sexual choices on "the strong incest inhibitions," her brothers, and "troubled memories of Father," Lim is simply articulating her belief that culture and family history have already determined her inclinations—she has no choice but to choose the Eurasian, the Indian, and the Caucasian men she encounters in her life. The relationships she has with these men, in one way or another, would lead her down new intellectual paths, would help her make up her mind about studying in the U.S., and would eventually help determine her choice of becoming a U.S. citizen. For when a university position opened up for her to teach English in Malaysia upon the completion of her doctoral studies, Lim has to give it up because Charles, her husband, would not be able to secure a similar position there, as the Malaysian government is "in the process of nationalizing the university." Even if this were not the case, Charles would rather stay in New York; for he has expressed to Lim his rather provincial belief that "once you've lived in New York, nowhere else counts" (255). Lim, therefore, has no choice but to honor her commitment to her husband and remain in the U.S. The trouble I have here with the causal reasoning in Lim's lack-of-choice argument is that it only spotlights the oppression suffered by the diasporic in her coerced state of "fugitive presence," while masking the luxuries of choice and opportunity that Lim has enjoyed.

One such luxury is the opportunity of a graduate education at Brandeis University paid for by a Fulbright fellowship. Lim's acceptance of this offer signals the first step she would take towards migrating to the U.S., a narrative that occupies the next half of her memoir. What Lim focuses on here is how this single step of leaving Malaysia for

the U.S. would irrevocably alter her cultural and national identities to produce a diasporic rootlessness, which would further intensify her sense of fugitive presence. The complexity of her Nyonya hybridity is translated into the equally complex, interstitial hybrid spaces she occupies as a "peripheral" Chinese American. The tri-focal images of "home"—America/China/Malaysia—only convince Lim of the need to find a way through which she can come to terms with her displacement and finally come "home," even if the latter is simply a construct of her imagination.

The diasporic's sense of dislocation Lim experiences at the point of her departure for the U.S.: "In the airport lounge, gazing at the *batik* decorations intended for tourist consumption, I felt already the disconnection of the stranger. I would never see Malaysia again, except through the eyes of a traveler" (213). But the hope of easy reterritorrialization is dashed when she is "bedeviled by the super-fragmentations that attend alien status in the United States" (246). Coupled with her father's death and the need to support her extended family financially, Lim decries the inevitable and repressive need to reconnect with her cultural roots once again:

> In writing the bank drafts I remained my father's daughter, returning to Father the bargain we had made. This is the meaning of blood—to give, because you cannot eat unless the family is also eating. For years, I woke up nights, heart beating wildly. Oh Asia, that nets its children in ties of blood so blinding that they cut the spirit. (251)

The cultural tension of wanting to be "home" and yet to flee leads Lim to compare herself to the "Chinese children [who] attend public schools" in California and to "their 'astronaut' fathers and mothers [who] live out of satellite apartments in Taiwan and Hong Kong": "Like these parents and their children, guilt and apology dogged my decision to

remain in the United States, and for over a decade, I did an emotional shuttle run between Asia and the United States, voluntarily displaced" (258).

The irony of Lim's comparison lies in the transparency of class privilege and Chinese diaspora's links to transnational capital in this particular reference to the "astronaut" parents and their children. In her critique of the "flexible citizenship" of Chinese in diaspora, Aihwa Ong illustrates how Chinese businessmen, in striving to maximize profits by "bypassing the regulations of the nation-state," would have their wives and children live in certain Western countries in order to gain the privileges of residency and citizenship; while they, like "astronauts," would remain "constantly 'in orbit,' caught between the desire to establish family residency abroad and to make money in" Asia. Ong problematizes the astronaut metaphor not only in its connection to transnational capital but also to the way it has been conceptualized as "a Chinese trope of postmodern displacement."[34] In relying on this trope to depict her own state of diasporic deterritorialization, Lim ironically and unwittingly aligns herself with these Chinese "astronaut" families in that they enjoy the luxury of being able to choose where they want to live, or to choose a life of transnational mobility by "shuttling" from one point of the globe to another.

Class position, which plays a crucial role in affording her this transnational mobility, also helps to map out, to a degree, Lim's career trajectory. Her first job was at a community college in South Bronx, where she successfully worked with the black and Latino students. But her failure to fit into the Puerto Rican neighborhood where she and Charles live leads her "to despair at . . . [her] middle-class hypocrisy and fears" (269). Though laudable her self-critique, she finally does quit her job "because The City

University of New York was threatening to close it down during yet another budget crisis" (278). She then moves to a suburban community college made up of predominantly white middle-class students. Though comfortable teaching there, Lim fails to obtain the administration's support for her research and publication and, most of all, for her bid to be promoted. Finally, a tenure-track position opens up for Lim at the University of California in Santa Barbara. After agonizing briefly over the hierarchical structure of the U.S. university system, she eventually accepts the position. The progression from the Bronx to Santa Barbara is an evolutionary one, where our heroine after much trial and tribulation overcomes the obstacles in her path and makes it to the pinnacle of her profession. But what is suggestive in this "success" story, when the reader is led to cheer Lim on, is the belief in the *eventuality* of that "success," modulated by the "disappearance" of class distinctions and hindrances—the notion that one will definitely succeed as long as one puts one's heart and soul to the task.

The reasons that Lim provides for her decision to accept the UC Santa Barbara position are interesting in that they work towards the major theme in the conclusion to her memoir—the notion of coming "home." The marginalization Lim experiences at the suburban community college affirms in her the need "to find another, more welcoming America in which poetry, Asia, and woman could be accepted in the same body" (338). Furthermore, "to grow as an Asian-American scholar," Lim reasons, "I needed a society of scholars, an abundance of talk, an antagonism of ideas, bracing hostile seriousness, and above all a community of women" (341). Hence, "California is perhaps the closest thing possible to moving home for Asian Americans . . ." (342). The reasons for Lim's westward move are legitimate and logical. But unfortunately, with these reasons, Lim

also has conveniently sidestepped the problematic and pressing issues of institutional and

intellectual elitism that remain unaddressed, apart from a token acknowledgment of their

existence.

Coming to California completes for Lim the circle that is her life story. It is a

moment of cultural, psychological, and social reterritorialization , a moment where the

contradictions of being a perpetual renegade, a fugitive presence, are finally to be

resolved:

> How do I reconcile these two different yet simultaneous images—the ropes that my mother and father have cunningly woven, invisible like spirits and ghosts, that tie me to the ancestral altar table which presides in every Confucian home; and the crashing surf that knocks me off my feet and throws me onto a beach, which is never the same from moment to moment?
>
> The dominant imprint I have carried with me since birth was a Malaysian homeland. It has been an imperative for me to make sense of these birthmarks; they compose the hieroglyphs of my body's senses. We tell stories to bind us to a spot, and often the stories that make us cry knot the thickest ropes. . . . Parents do not die; they merely take on the form of ancestral spirits, tenacious in their power, keeping you a child forever in your first imagination. With such ghosts, it has taken me a longer time to leave home than most immigrants.
>
> To give up the struggle for a memorialized homeland may be the most forgiving act I can do. Everywhere I have lived in the United States . . . I felt an absence of place, myself absent in America. Absence was the story my mother taught me, that being the story of her migrant people, the Malacca peranakans. But perhaps she was also teaching me that home is the place where our stories are told. Had I more time to talk to Mother, perhaps I could have learned to forgive, listening to her stories. In California, I am beginning to write stories about America, as well as Malaysia. Listening, and telling my own stories, I am moving home. (347-48)

The emotional power this passage wields as it concludes Lim's memoir is undeniable. It

seeks to reaffirm our belief in literature and it ability to change lives. As moving as this

idealized formulation may be, Lim's theories on "absence" and storytelling are troubling

and deserve closer examination.

"Absence" as the ontological state of diasporic consciousness produced by hybridity is problematic in that it directs attention to the oppression of cultural displacement and violation while denying the very rootedness and materiality that mark the reality of everyday life, immigrant or otherwise. In other words, the abstraction of "absence," like the abstract theorization of hybridity and diaspora, masks the political and power hierarchies that enable the sort of mobility that Lim has in translating herself from Malacca, to New York, and finally to Santa Barbara.

As for the notion of storytelling, Lim obviously sees it as a way of rooting herself culturally, the idea of finally coming "home," through an aestheticization of the politics of cultural identity, postcoloniality, and diaspora. This is an instance of what Arif Dirlik has observed to be "the tendency of so much postcolonial criticism to start off with a sociology of power relationships only to take refuge in aesthetic phraseology."[35] The problem with Lim's theory of storytelling is not so much in one's doubting literature's efficacy in promoting social, cultural, or political intervention and change; but rather, the telling of stories appears to be too convenient a way of resolving the cultural tensions and contradictions of imperialism, racial politics, class differences, and gender inequalities, especially as they intersect hybridity and diaspora in Lim's memoir.

If *Among the White Moonfaces* is any indication of Lim's notion of storytelling *par excellence* (and Lim is indeed a brilliant poet and fiction writer), then the telling of her life story has in some ways failed to live up to the work's initial tone of political critique. Lim's token self-critique has been neutralized when the political and institutional power grids that have situated her where she is now remain unexamined. As for the mainstream American reader, Lim's turn to storytelling signals a non-threatening

strategy, which in spite of its engagement in the liberal critique of racism, patriarchy, and imperialism, ultimately comforts the reader in its reification of the myth of the American Dream and the surety of immigrant success.

Notes

[1] Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Among the White Moonfaces: Memoirs of a Nyonya Feminist* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1996), 255.

[2] A good introduction to Lim's fictional work between 1967 and 1990 is the collection of short stories entitled, *Life's Mysteries: The Best of Shirley Lim* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1995).

[3] Shirley Geok-lin Lim, ed., *Approaches to Teaching Kingston's* The Woman Warrior (New York: MLA, 1991); Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Amy Ling, eds., *Reading the Literatures of Asian America* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1992). Other significant essays include: "Reconstructing Asian American Poetry: A Case for Ethnopoetics," *MELUS* 14, no.2 (1987): 51-63; "Assaying the Gold: Or, Contesting the Ground of Asian American Literature," *New Literary History* 24 (1993): 147-69; "Immigration and Diaspora," *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, Ed. King-kok Cheung (New York: Cambridge UP, 1997): 289-311.

[4] Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Mayumi Tsutakawa, and Margarita Donnelly, eds., *The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Women's Anthology* (Corvallis, OR: Calyx, 1989). See also the following essays by Lim: "Japanese American Women's Life Stories: Maternality in Monica Sone's *Nisei Daughter* and Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*," *Feminist Studies* 16 (1990): 288-313; "Semiotics, Experience, and the Material Self: An Inquiry into the Subject of the Contemporary Asian Woman Writer," *Women's Studies* 18, no.2-3 (1990): 153-76; "Asian American Daughters Rewriting Asian Maternal Texts," *Asian Americans: Comparative and Global Perspectives*, Eds. Shirley Hume, Hyung-chan Kim, Stephen S. Fugita, and Amy Ling (Pullman: Washington State UP, 1991): 239-48; "The Tradition of Chinese American Women's Life Stories: Thematics of Race and Gender in Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*," *American Women's Autobiography: Fea(s)ts of Memory*, Ed. Margo Culley (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1992): 252-67; "Feminist and Ethnic Literary Theories in Asian American Literature," *Feminist Studies* 19 (1993): 571-96; "Hegemony and 'Anglo-American Feminism': Living in the Funny House," *Tulsa Studies in Women Literature* 12 (1993): 279-88; "Up Against the National Canon: Women's War Memoirs from Malaysia and Singapore," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 28, no.1 (1993): 47-64; "The Center Can(not) Hold: U.S. Women's Studies and Global Feminism," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 26, no.3-4 (1998): 30-39.

[5] Zhou Xiaojing, introduction to *Among the White Moonfaces: Memoirs of a Nyonya Feminist*, by Shirley Geok-lin Lim (Singapore: Times Books International, 1996), 9.

[6] Teochew is one of the many dialect groups that constitute the Chinese race.

[7] Lisa Lowe, "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Asian American Differences," *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke UP, 1996), 67.

[8] Ibid., 75.

[9] For a critique of transnational capital's co-optation of multiculturalism to serve its purposes, see David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990); Lisa Lowe, "Imagining Los Angeles in the Production of Multiculturalism," *Immigrant Acts*, 84-96; Masao Miyoshi, "A Borderless World? From Colonialism to Transnationalism and the Decline of the Nation State," *Critical Inquiry* 19 (1993): 726-51; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Teaching for the Times," *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, Eds. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997), 468-90. An intriguing case study is available in Katharyne Mitchell, "In Whose Interest? Transnational Capital and the Production of Multiculturalism in Canada," *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*, Eds. Rob Wilson and Wismal Dissanayake (Durham: Duke UP, 1996), 219-51.

[10] Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992), 127.

[11] Quoted in Ahmad, *In Theory*, 127.

[12] Ahmad, *In Theory*, 127.

[13] Ibid., 130.

[14] Quoted in Ahmad, *In Theory*, 130.

[15] Aijaz Ahmad, "The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality," *Race & Class* 36, no.3 (1995): 13.

[16] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 4.

[17] Ibid., 9. For further notes on the "unhomely," turn to Bhabha, "The World and the Home," *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, Eds. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997), 445-55.

[18] Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (Durham: Duke UP, 1996).

[19] Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 38-39.

[20] Ella Shohat, "Notes on the 'Post-Colonial,'" *Social Text* 31/32 (1992): 109.

[21] Ahmad, "Politics of Literary Postcoloniality," 12.

[22] Arif Dirlik, "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism," *Critical Inquiry* 20 (1994): 342.

[23] Ahmad, "Politics of Literary Postcoloniality," 17.

[24] Shohat, "Notes on the 'Post-Colonial,'" 110.

[25] Lim, *Among the White Moonfaces*, 319. Subsequent references to this text will be parenthetically documented.

[26] Lim's book is one of the many "academic memoirs" written by women, a genre that has proliferated during the 1990s. See Nancy K. Miller, "Public Statements, Private Lives: Academic Memoirs for the Nineties," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 22 (1997): 981-1015.

[27] The subtitle "Memoirs of a Nyonya Feminist" is used in the Singapore/Malaysia edition published by Times International, while the U.S. edition is entitled *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands* (New York: Feminist P at CUNY, 1996). For the purposes of appealing to a local readership, the term "Nyonya" obviously has more resonance for Singaporeans and Malaysians, especially when the former are predominantly Chinese, many of whom are of Nyonya descent.

[28] A brief but lucid account of the Peranakans is available in "Hybrids," chapter eight of Lynn Pan, *Sons of the Yellow Emperor: The Story of the Overseas Chinese* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1990). For a more handsomely illustrated depiction of Nyonya culture, see Joo Ee Khoo, *The Straits Chinese: A Cultural History* (Amsterdam: Pepin P, 1996).

[29] Like Teochew, Hokkien is another major dialect group among the Chinese in Malaysia and Singapore.

[30] A more literal translation would be "an Indian-child devil," though Lim is probably referring to the derogatory expression's usage by the Chinese to denote, in a more broadly encompassing way, those who are racially or culturally "tainted."

[31] The relations between Chinese and Malays have been tense, to say the least, during much of the colonial and postcolonial history of Malaysia and Singapore. Racial riots between the two groups erupted during the 1960s in both countries. The Malaysian

government has been guilty of instituting an unfair affirmative action-type policy on behalf of the Malay majority, also known as the *Bumiputra* (roughly translated as the "Princes of the Land"). This policy discriminates against the Chinese and Indian minorities, especially in terms of government employment, university education, financial aid, and political appointments. But to solely excoriate Malay racism and discrimination against the Chinese would be an injustice, as the rich Chinese elite also have a part to play in manipulating and exploiting the economy to their advantage (not unlike the Indonesian Chinese), hence drawing the ire and resentment of the Malay majority.

[32] To be more accurate, my subsequent discussion of determinism in Lim's work is not to suggest that there is a total absence of choice but that Lim's choices are *determined* by the cultural and social spaces she occupies.

[33] Some of these themes and Lim's critique of them are also evident in her short stories. See especially "The Farmer's Wife," "A Pot of Rice," "All My Uncles," and "Keng Hua," all available in *Life's Mysteries*.

[34] Aihwa Ong, "On the Edge of Empires: Flexible Citizenship among Chinese in Diaspora," *positions* 1 (1993): 761. See page 762 for a comic illustration taken from the *South China Morning Post*, 20 March 1989, depicting a Chinese "astronaut" having lifelines that connect him to Hong Kong, Canada, and Australia.

[35] Dirlik, "Postcolonial Aura," 343. See footnote 20.

CHAPTER 5

POLITICAL INERTIA AND THE SINGAPOREAN IN DIASPORA:
REFLECTIONS ON THE MICHAEL FAY DEBACLE AND
FIONA CHEONG'S POETICS OF INNOCENCE

Reading the Singaporean in Diaspora

The recent appearance of "autobiographical literary criticism" in literary and
critical scholarship has served to destabilize the formal and traditional boundaries of
criticism as a genre by examining the significance and impact of personal experience on
the reading of texts, as well as the formative influence of textuality on shaping personal
experiences. The premise of this mode of criticism lies in the idea that "writers [of
criticism] know the literature through themselves and know themselves through the
literature."[1] What I find intriguing about this dialectic approach is that it displaces the
impersonal detachment of criticism and, in so doing, allows the critic to interrogate more
openly his or her own motivations in choosing to engage particular texts and to write
about them from certain political perspectives. Conversely, the writing of criticism itself
has transformational effects in that such a personal critical space enables one to explore
the questions of identity construction and to negotiate shifting political, cultural, and
national positioning and alliances, negotiations that will eventually affect the material and
everyday existence of the one who occupies this critical space.

Though the writing in my dissertation cannot be construed as autobiographical
literary criticism per se, the impulse is deeply personal, especially as I examine in

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retrospect the critical maneuvers I have engaged so far and as I anticipate reading and writing "myself" (a Singaporean in diaspora) into this concluding chapter on the Singaporean American experience. This entire project on the cultural politics of "peripheral" Chinese Americans has allowed me to wrestle with some of the cultural contradictions that constitute my own diasporic experience as an alien resident in the United States. Although I tackle different issues by tracking the historical and cultural specificities of various "peripheral" Chinese American subgroups, their concerns and problems frequently parallel my own. Therefore, theoretically working through some of these concerns has been productive for me in my own struggle to come to terms with a diasporic identity that is ideologically marked in often conflicting ways by a British neo-colonial education, a Chinese upbringing, a Singaporean nationalism, and ten years of an American tertiary education.

By choosing to focus on the political—and I am not just referring to the questions of race, gender, and class, but also more specifically to my critique of transnational capitalism, authoritarian regimes, and the violation of human rights—I am drawing from a deep well of political suppression and inhibition that characterizes the Singaporean national psyche. The people of the island nation that sits one degree of latitude above the equator have survived and even prospered under the semi-authoritarian government dominated by a single political party for the past thirty-four years since independence. But the miracle of Singapore's economic success, which has elevated it from its humble "Third World" beginnings to become one of Asia's four economic dragons, and the relatively high standard of living that it brings often camouflage the suppression of political dissidence and the violation of political rights and freedoms. This state of

political inhibition has been so naturalized as part of the sociopolitical pragmatism of many Singaporeans that it has translated itself into a social myth of cultural wisdom. Political passivity and complacency are transcribed as positive national values to be handed down from one generation to another.[2] As my parents and grandparents, like many other older Singaporeans, used to say, "Politics is something that one should avoid talking about, especially in public. As long as our rice bowl is intact, the government is doing its job." Such platitudes of "wisdom" serve to inculcate the fear of the political in the citizen by invoking the greater fear, be it imaginary or real, of being watched. Singapore, hence, has become what Foucault would term a panoptic "machine" of political and ideological surveillance.[3]

In my mind's eye, Singapore is visualized as a pristine, politically sanitized, and ideologically controlled urban zone, geopolitically demarcated by its national boundaries. The crossing of these boundaries, especially for many Singaporean diasporics, signifies also a crossing into zones of un-policed political free speech. It is this diasporic imaginary of "release" and freedom that I have in mind when I think of my own motivations for choosing to relocate to the United States. What America stands for for many immigrants is the idealization of democracy, individual rights, and political freedoms, all of which are contested categories that constantly require rethinking and sometimes even critique. My point here is that the diasporic narrative of "release" needs to be critically reexamined, not so much because there is an absence of truth in it, but that it presents a moment of political and cultural contradiction that needs to be carefully negotiated by the Singaporean American. I find in the notion of "release" both pleasure and uneasiness; for just as it offers a critique of the Singapore government's ideological

strategies to remain in power, it also supports the narrative of political progression that situates the West at the forefront of the evolutionary scale.

The ambivalence I have articulated towards this notion of "release" is reflective of what Salman Rushdie calls a "stereoscopic vision," where the migrant is subjected to having "a kind of double perspective" by being both "insiders and outsiders."[4] Instead of trying to privilege this double vision of the migrant as the ideal cultural perspective (a position I have critiqued in Chapter Four), I see it more as a troubling state of cultural complexity and negotiation. For the politically radical Singaporean diasporic in America, the stereoscopic vision encompasses a criticism of the political suppression in Singapore that, at the same time, necessitates a questioning of the Orientalizing rhetoric of political progression and evolution in the U.S. Singaporeans, like many who come from newly decolonized nations, have been marked as lacking the political maturity and courage to resist the comforting paternalism of strong-man regimes; and their "release" from the clutches of their own government is construed as an initiation into an education in the more progressive forms of American political and social values.

As a mean of fleshing out this stereoscopic vision, I would like to revisit my reactions to Singapore's 1994 international public relations fiasco surrounding the caning of Michael Fay. This incident raises the issue of political (im)maturity, which Fiona Cheong also problematizes in her novel *The Scent of the Gods* through the construction of a poetics of innocence that challenges the Singapore government's rhetoric of trust. My reading of Cheong's work will permit me to conclude this chapter by examining the implications of her political aesthetics against the backdrop of a Singaporean culture of political dependency and inertia.

The Michael Fay Case: Nationalism, Crisis, and Human Rights

In the years I have spent in the United States prior to 1994, I have resigned myself to the task of explaining to many Americans I meet that Singapore is not a part of mainland China. But the summer of 1994 provided a brief reprieve for me, though not in the way that I had anticipated. Singapore had suddenly found a place in the geographical vocabulary of the news-reading American public when its criminal justice system came under scrutiny as a result of the Michael Fay case. Fay, an eighteen-year-old teenager from Dayton, Ohio, was convicted of spray-painting and damaging cars in Singapore. The courts there sentenced him to four months imprisonment, a fine of US$2233, and six strokes of the cane (a sentence that was later reduced to four). The controversy of this case lies in the brutality of caning and the fact that an American youth is involved. But what it also does is that it redirects American attention to the issue of crime in U.S. society and the measures that need to be taken to address it.

Although I was in the U.S. during that summer, I had the opportunity of talking to many Singaporeans about the issue, those who are living in the U.S. as well as my friends and family in Singapore. Although the opinions I received were varied, there was a general consensus that I find disturbing and problematic. A certain triumphant vehemence belies their pointing out that Fay needed to be firmly taught a lesson which his family and the American justice system were unwilling to mete out. What I find horrifying about this response is that many of them, being Singaporeans, are acutely aware of the incredible violence caning inflicts on its victim. As a former director of prisons in Singapore describes it, "The officer uses the whole of his body weight and not just the strength of his arm . . . He pivots on his feet to deliver the stroke . . . After three

strokes, the buttocks will be covered in blood."[5] Or, as an editorial in the *New York Times* puts it, and with no exaggeration I might add, "the cane delivers skin-splitting whacks so excruciatingly painful that strong men pass out in a state of shock. If Michael Fay . . . does lose consciousness, standard practice would be to revive and re-tether him to complete a flogging certain to leave permanent scars on body and spirit."[6] Such accounts of this cruel punishment are so well circulated within the Singapore body social that they are mythologized into the popular folk imaginary and, hence, have become implements of the disciplinary machine that keep Singaporeans politically subdued and generally passive. Furthermore, caning is often reserved for "hard-core" offenders of crimes such as rape, drug trafficking, and manslaughter. Since Singaporeans are aware that caning is an unusually cruel punishment and that, in Fay's case, the severity of the punishment does not fit the petty nature of the crime, why do so many of them approve of the Singapore judicial system's decision in this particular case? I would like to consider a number of possible reasons for this reaction.

For Singaporeans who buy into the government's arguments, Michael Fay functions as a convenient and non-threatening target for which to direct anti-West sentiments and rhetoric.[7] Since Singapore has the legal right to punish Fay the way it sees fit, this case becomes an opportunity for a tiny nation-state to thumb its nose at the remaining superpower in the world without incurring economic and military repercussions. By using the Fay case to invoke nationalist fervor against an imperialist power, the government has succeeded in manufacturing a "crisis" situation[8] that would bind the people together in support of its Eastern values versus Western degeneracy argument. As Hill and Lian note, "the security and identity of citizens [in Singapore]

have to be reinforced by the creation of recurrent 'crises' which draw attention to the state's key arbitrating role."[9] Part of that role is to identify "threat[s] from without" in the form of *"cultural* crisis" that is often "represented as the intensified danger of contamination by the West. . . ."[10] For instance, a statement from Singapore's Ministry of Home Affairs is quick to question the moral authority of the U.S. in preaching its standards of criminal justice and its position on human rights by noting that "Singapore has its own standards of social order" and that it does "not have a situation where acts of vandalism are commonplace, as in cities like New York, where even police cars are not spared the acts of vandals."[11] One reporter from the *Far Eastern Economic Review* sees the Fay incident as a "collision of values" and quotes Singapore's Senior Minister and former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew as saying that, "The fundamental difference between Western concepts of society and government and East Asian concepts is that Eastern societies believe that the individual exists in the context of his family. He is not pristine and separate. The family is part of the extended family, and then friends and the wider society."[12]

The American response, on the other hand, took two forms.[13] The more liberal argument, with the *New York Times* leading the charge, basically condemns the caning sentence as "medieval torture"[14] and calls on prominent Americans such as George Bush, who was visiting Singapore at the time, and business leaders stationed in Singapore to register their protest.[15] In fact, the paper drew special attention to the idea that Fay was subjected to police brutality while in custody and that a confession was coerced out of him.[16] More conservative responses vary from that of total support for Fay's caning— Ohio Representative Tony Hall's office received mail that "demands not clemency but

the lash"[17]—to a questioning of the brutality of the punishment that is augmented by an acknowledgment that America is in need of a similar but less extreme version of corporal punishment to deter crime.[18] George Bush's response typifies this position. He argues that though "most Americans want stronger jaws," "the punishment should fit the crime—caning is brutal." On the other hand, he praises Singapore's achievements: "When I think of Singapore, I think of prosperity, I think of democracy, I think of safe streets."[19]

My response during the time can be described as a complex shuttling between critiques that seem to contradict one another and that ultimately mark me as both insider and outsider in the eyes of both Singaporeans and Americans. The confrontation I had with my fellow Singaporeans was based on my deconstruction of the Eastern versus Western values dualism and my dismantling of the notion that Asian sociality and individual rights are mutually exclusive (two major critiques that I have engaged in throughout this dissertation). What I also tried to appeal to was a sense of justice and fairness, which the Fay sentencing betrayed. Despite the fact that I acknowledge my empathy with their nationalist feelings against U.S. imperialism, the Singaporeans I talked to have already in their minds labeled me as one "corrupted" by Western notions of human rights and political freedom.

Broaching the issue with Americans was a different ball game altogether. Apart from having to acquaint them with the *terror* and *brutality* of this form of punishment, which "resembles too closely the childhood spankings or fraternity hazings that many Americans remember with something bordering on nostalgia,"[20] and hence demystify their longing for a quick and easy remedy to an entrenched problem of urban crime, I had

to also carefully negotiate my way around the Orientalizing tendencies of the U.S. media's depiction of cruel punishments in connection with "traditional" Asian culture.[21] I was seeking to avoid the kind of primitivism that would consequently be linked to Singaporeans, Asians, and ultimately Asian Americans in general, a goal that made my attempt to describe the caning process an especially difficult task, in light of the fact that I wished to emphasize the savagery and brutality of the process.

One way of summarizing my response to the Fay incident is through the notion of political (im)maturity. On the one hand, I argue that Singaporeans need to realize that human rights and political freedom are essential components of democratic participation. Only in their willingness to actively take risks in speaking their minds and taking positions that may oppose the status quo will they be able to transcend their political complacency and inertia and deepen their understanding and praxis of participatory government. This argument I make rather uneasily, as it can fit into the thesis that Singaporeans are a politically immature lot, a notion that fails to take into consideration the everyday reality of living in a politically oppressive climate. This idea also situates Singapore as the political Other of the United States, which makes the latter appear more politically evolved, a thesis that needs to be critiqued, especially in that it enables those in America to talk down to others who do not subscribe to American political ideals and forms of government. I believe it is this uneasiness that Singaporean American writers such as Fiona Cheong need to contend with when they choose to depict their homeland. In the following section, I will offer a reading of Cheong's first novel *The Scent of the Gods* in order to examine her poetics of innocence, which is an attempt to wrestle with

this political (im)maturity problematic and its intersection with the ideology of trust/oppression.

Trust/Oppression: Fiona Cheong's Poetics of Innocence

The Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989 came as a shock to the Chinese people, not just in the horrifying brutality of the government's actions, but also in the people's exposure to the contradictions within Chinese authoritarianism, embedded in the ideology of what Rey Chow calls "governing-by-trust."[22] In her book *Writing Diaspora*, Chow observes that the most common response among the Chinese to their government's act of violence is one "of disbelief: We can't believe that the party would do such a thing!"[23] This "disbelief" ruptures the ideology of trust as the principle of Chinese rule, a trust the Chinese government insists its people should have in their leaders, a trust which was eventually betrayed in the government's attempt to "resolve" the Tiananmen crisis. The Chinese word for "trust," *xin*, "is made up of 'human being' on one side [of the ideogram] and 'word'/'speech' on the other."[24] Chow's reading of this word, hence, leads her to argue that "the cult of the strong man"[25] forms an integral part of the Chinese political psyche. Trusting the strong leader, as the analysis of the ideogram further suggests, also means taking him at his word.[26] What I find remarkable about Chow's critique is that it reveals how "trust" and "oppression" frequently form rhetorical and ironic flip sides of the ideology of Chinese rule. In the same way, the cult of the strong man, being a crucial part of this ideological apparatus, can also be re-mapped, using the trust/oppression paradigm, into that of the wise and caring Father/patriarchal oppressor.

By invoking Chow's theoretical interventions on the Chinese political scene as a starting point to read Fiona Cheong's *The Scent of the Gods*, which is set in the early

post-independence period in Singapore's nationalist history, I am not in any way suggesting that Singapore, at any point of its postcolonial history, endorses Chinese Communism or engages in the same kind of terrorism and violence on its citizenry as China did; for even the most critical political observers in the West would consider the Singapore government to be only semi-authoritarian in its rule, deploying what one could term a gentle authoritarianism, or what Li Shin, one of the characters in Cheong's novel, rather interestingly calls a "guided democracy."[27] The point of comparison instead lies in the way the two countries use the political ideology of trust in the interpellation of its citizens into the ruling party's ideological fold. It is this logic of trust that characterizes the political milieu of Cheong's novel.

The basic argument that the Chinese government made in defense of its actions at Tiananmen and, similarly, in its response to the Hong Kong people's demands for democracy and the protection of their civil rights is mainland China's need to privilege political stability and economic growth over individual rights. China, in vigorously pursuing a new economic policy in recent days (which is basically capitalism under the guise of Communist reform), believes in the importance of political stability and unity to foster economic growth and to attract international investors; the ideology of trust, thereby, comes in handy as the non-violent alternative of muting political opposition and in conditioning the people to surrender their political rights for the sake of the State.

In the initial years after independence, the Singapore government led by the People's Action Party (PAP) has been advocating the need for unity and stability in order for the country to grow economically. Leading a fledgling nation just released from the Federation of Malaya, the then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, who embodied (and still

embodies) the cult of the strong man,[28] emphasized the need for strong government, political order, and national unity (over personal politics and political dissent) in order that Singapore might become a modern nation-state. One can argue and debate the merits of this position, especially when there is so much at stake in terms of the survival of an island-nation without a hinterland, without natural resources, and especially with the threat of racial tensions between the Malays and Chinese looming ahead. The subsequent survival and success of Singapore thus have often been attributed to this position adopted by the ruling party. However, what is problematic about this argument is that a sustained focus on the need for national stability through political unity hinders the productive interplay of heterogeneous and diverse political voices, and in ways creates in the people a political inertia through a climate of complacency and, sometimes, fear.

To understand the workings of the ideology of trust, one needs to examine its place within the parent/child hierarchy. Where the Father/Government leads, the child/citizen must follow. What is thus expected of the child/citizen is a child-like innocence and faith in the good will and wisdom of an all-knowing Father. It is within this notion of innocence and faith that I would like to situate *The Scent of the Gods*. The first-person narrative that Fiona Cheong constructs is filtered through the consciousness of Su Yen, the eleven-year-old protagonist and narrator. Her narrative reflects a certain child-like innocence and sensibility through which the reader experiences, what Su Yen does, the familial trials and political intrigues of a newly independent Singapore. However, the narrative's silences, denials, and mystifications, instead of obscuring truth, create an ironic clarity that ultimately unmasks the ideology of trust.

The world that Su Yen inhabits is a world where children are supposedly protected and shielded from the trials and tribulations of the adult world. The sphere of the child, therefore, is arbitrarily demarcated by a discursive cordon sanitaire, where certain knowledges are deemed "inappropriate" for a child's ear. "This matter is not for children" (174), Su Yen's Grandma authoritatively and definitively states, even when the other adults in the family debate the need for the children to know about Aunt Daisy's pregnancy. In order to enforce this maternal edict, certain social and discursive mechanisms have been set in place to reify these separate spheres. Adult conversation is often conducted "in low, serious voices" (173) or "in hushed tones" behind closed doors (76), talking which stops when the children's presence is felt. When information inevitably reaches the children, explanation is frequently and intentionally over-simplified, postponed, circumvented or, worst of all, short-circuited with an authoritative statement of "fact" that is either incomprehensible or logically contradictory, and that demands the children's acceptance under the imprimatur of adult authority. The children's grandma also resorts to mythopoeic devices such as the traditional Chinese talk-story, which most of us have encountered in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. As Su Yen recollects, Grandma "had fringed our lives with her stories of wars and ghosts, and when we were younger we would believe what she said, and do only what she said" (225). These stories serve not just to instruct but also, in some situations, to obfuscate and to avoid explanation. Hence, it is through these social and discursive devices that the adults wield the power to control what the children can or cannot know, thereby shaping the children's world view. Implicit in this control is the assumption of trust: children are to trust that the adults know what is best for them; by obeying

commands and submitting to often mystifying and even illogical explanations of the world around them, the children are apparently relieved of the ethical, philosophical, and political responsibilities that rest on the capable shoulders of the adults. In a sense, this system of trust also functions as a microcosmic view of the larger political world of the novel's 1960s Singapore. The political child/citizen can safely trust in the capable leadership of the adult/government. The child/citizen, hence, is immobilized in a space of political ignorance, producing what one could call a culture of dependency and passivity.

By creating a narrative of child-like innocence, Cheong allows her reader to directly access the experiences of the children as they undergo anticipation and frustration in having to trust the adults in spite of the contradictions and mystifications. Cheong, through the narrator Su Yen, skillfully teases the reader by revealing enough to push the plot along and yet withholding most of the information that the adult characters are privy to, to frustrate reader expectation. This anxious need to know enables the reader to empathize with the children who, with the exception of Su Yen's cousin Li Shin, are continually kept in the dark.

In order to accomplish this, Cheong deploys a number of narrative strategies: Su Yen overhears bits and pieces of the adults' conversations which require reconstruction and filling in the gaps; description of everyday sounds permeate the narrative, something that one would often take for granted; visual imagery includes scenes and objects that reflect the observations of a child who has been excluded from adult interaction and hence, has the luxury of time to scrutinize the physical details of the world around her. Su Yen's ability to infuse her narrative with such intricate details of sound and sight is a

result of her participation in the disciplinary processes that keep children within their sphere through silence and submission: "No one expected me to say anything. Chinese children were not expected to say much, girls even less so than boys. My duty was to watch and listen. So I watched" (11).

This particular passage deserves some attention in that it reveals the obvious ironic intent of my use of the term "narrative of innocence," for clearly subversive strategies are at work in the narrator's recounting of what she has seen and heard as a child. The fragmented bits of adult conversation, Su Yen's imposed silence, Grandma's mystifying talk-stories and "explanation," or her complete avoidance or postponement of such explanations contribute to the overall subversive quality of Su Yen's narrative. "The art of silence," according to King-kok Cheung in her book *Articulate Silences*, "covers various 'strategies of reticence' . . . –irony, hedging, coded language, muted plots—used by women to tell the forbidden and name the unspeakable."[29] The contesting and revelatory power of silences, cover-ups, and evasions lies not so much in what they tell, but rather in what they do not reveal. The sounds of army trucks rumbling past their house "taking recruits to the barracks" late at night, Uncle Tien disappearing one day after an earlier visit by government men, and Li Shin's death at the hands of some mysterious figures in the dark of the night are instances where silences suggestively outline the political intrigues of the adult world. By fulfilling her duty "to watch and listen," Su Yen provides readers a glimpse into her world and, hence, encourages them to fill in what she does not see and hear.

When she does engage in conversation either with her cousins or with the adults, Su Yen, like most children, asks questions which reflect a child's innocent curiosity and a

line of reasoning that is brutally honest and clear. At many points in the narrative, these questions form deconstructive moments which fracture the political logic of trust and expose its contradictions. The following passage, where Su Yen seeks Li Shin's assistance in helping her disentangle the intricacies of Singapore politics, particularly exemplifies how a child-like perspective can rather subtly subvert politically hegemonic rhetoric:

> In Great-Grandfather's house the grown-ups argued over the Internal Security Act. Uncle Tien kept insisting that it was undemocratic. I asked Li Shin, what was the Internal Security Act? He said, "Arrest and detention without trial." I asked him, what did that mean? He said it meant that the government did not need solid proof that someone was a Communist, that person could be arrested and sent to jail. I asked him, why would the government do that? He said the government wouldn't arrest someone without having a good reason. (49-50)

Li Shin's answer to Su Yen's last question is indicative of his own interpellation by the government's ideology of trust, where such circular reasoning becomes acceptable, all on the basis that the government knows best. As children of the State, they must not worry about such so-called "adult" issues and concerns. It is significant at this juncture to point out that this interpellation by the ideology of trust through the adult/child paradigm is not simply effected through the direct relationship between the State and its citizens, but that it also operates through the family, which Louis Althusser has identified as one of the many Ideological State Apparatuses.[30] The familial and social tradition where children are taught not to question but to simply trust, in this sense, lays the groundwork and prepares them to accept the government's ideology of trust. Su Yen, in having this notion drilled into her consciousness, echoes its lessons in her restatement of what Grandma has often said to her: "One day when I was older, . . . I would understand what she meant, and I would be grateful that . . ." (9). And one can fill in the blank.

Another passage I would like to cite, though similar to the one earlier, does provide further insight into the means with which Su Yen often comes to terms with or "resolves" the contradictions she encounters, albeit in an understandably child-like manner:

> "What is a guided democracy?" I asked.
> He [Li Shin] said this meant we were guided by the Prime Minister, who was head of PAP. We were not like America. America was a free democracy, he said, because American people did not like being guided.
> "How come we don't want a free democracy?" I asked.
> "Because we're Asians," he said. "We don't always believe the same things as Americans."
> "Do the Communists want a free democracy?" I asked.
> No, he said, Communists did not believe in democracy at all. Communists believed that any kind of democracy was actually imperialism.
> I was getting confused because I did not understand how a free democracy could be imperialist. But America was not my country. I was worried about my country. My country was the one the Communists wanted. And if they succeeded in brainwashing our citizens against the PAP, what would happen? . . .
> Then we would have a new government, a Communist government. We would have a leader like Chairman Mao. Chairman Mao sent teachers and doctors into rice fields and made them work as farmers, and now China had become backward. The same thing would happen to us. We would become uneducated. Westerners would not be allowed to enter Singapore. We would lose touch with the modern world, and all our citizens would be wearing old-fashioned dark blue Chinese shirts and trousers, and riding on bicycles. (50-51)

As she tussles with the political rhetoric Li Shin feeds her, Su Yen innocently asks questions that a child would. The deeper her questions lead her into the political labyrinth the more confused she gets by the discontinuities of logic and the surfacing of contradictions. Through this perspective of child-like innocence, Su Yen's narrative engages the forbidden; and by laying bare the typical political arguments, of which Li

Shin's answers are representative, the narrative cries out to its readers to critique the rhetoric presented.

Another significant point about this passage is the way Su Yen in a superficial sense resolves the contradictions she sees. She allows herself to succumb to the fear of a Communist takeover of the country, though she is reacting not entirely to the supposed horrors of Communist austerity and indoctrination, but rather to the thought of losing the material comforts that a capitalist modernity apparently brings. As her narration immediately following this passage illustrates, she recoils in typical teenage horror at the prospect of having to dress in "old-fashioned dark blue Chinese shirts and trousers" and having to bind her feet, a practice that Chinese girls of the upper class were unfortunately and cruelly subjected to during the Ch'ing dynasty. She, like her adult relatives, however, fails to see the fallacious reasoning behind her conflation of Chinese traditional practices and Communist politics, and the false dilemma of having to choose between a "guided democracy" and Communism. But what is even more telling in her response is the fact that she reacts like any child would. Her immediate material concerns and desires take precedence over her initial curiosity about things political, as one would expect of most eleven-year-olds. Her tendency to shift attention quickly away from the unresolved political contradictions that have momentarily perplexed her underscores her immaturity. My argument, hence, is that Su Yen's political "immaturity," apart from her childlike faith, forms an integral part of the ideology of trust and is what this ideology demands and enforces. (The Singapore government, therefore, is as capable as the West of producing Orientalist images of the people under its rule for the purposes of sustaining its own political hegemony.) Su Yen's concern about the ugly Communist dress code is

also symbolic of what C. J. W.-L. Wee observes to be the newly independent Singapore's "creation of an indigenous, countrywide consumer culture as a mark of success."[31] To produce this consumer culture, as the government's argument goes, requires Singapore to transform itself into an industrialized modern nation-state. Racial, political, and national unities are imperative, and trust in the government facilitates the formation of such unities. Hence, the need to encourage the citizenry towards independent political thinking and choice must take a back seat to the more "urgent" task at hand. The assumption is that as long as the people's material needs and desires are met, through a consumer culture, and if a strong and politically entrenched government can do the job of moving the nation into an economically and technologically competitive state, why complicate the people's lives with the problems of political difference and, more significantly, political choice? If the people's standard of living has been elevated, why stir political waters, which will only disrupt the comfortable lifestyle the government has provided? Such an argument also belies a gentle threat, premised on a slippery slope argument and on another false dilemma: your comfortable and peaceful way of life can only be maintained through unity and a strong one-party government; the alternative is the disruption of that lifestyle and the nation's collapse into political chaos and economic uncertainty.

The Singapore government's desire to freeze its citizens in a state of political childhood by maintaining their attachment to a consumer culture has come into conflict with its project of nation-building and patriotism. This is evident in Thomas Bellows' observation that "Singaporeans . . . are permeated with strong doses of self-centeredness, materialism, and self-gratification. On the other hand, the government has repeatedly

called for the maintenance of a 'rugged' society whose members are to be courteous, industrious, family-oriented, and patriotic."[32] This inconsistency in the government's rhetoric has become even more conspicuous in Singapore today, where the drive towards creativity (for the purposes of capitalist innovation and expansion) that the government has encouraged in its citizens also produces as an inevitable and much feared by-product of individualized expressions of political thought, analysis, and critique. The ideology of trust and its culture of political inertia and dependency, hence, are untenable in that they assume Singaporeans are not ready and mature enough to think for themselves or to deal with competing and dissenting political voices.

In giving her readers a glimpse into the politically stifling world of 1960s Singapore through a poetics of innocence, Cheong seeks not to valorize this political state of "immaturity" and inertia, which is tropologically represented by the child-like perspective of the narrator. Instead the aporetic moments of silence and obfuscation ironically subvert this perspective by demonstrating how limited it is. I believe also that Cheong's text is a subtle but urgent call for Singaporeans to question the politics of trust and inertia and to move beyond the complacency and dependency that have characterized the political consciousness of the populace for more than three decades. It is also an affirmation of the Singaporean's ability to deal with the complexities and difficulties that political choice and freedom present.[33]

Notes

[1] Diane P. Freedman, Olivia Frey, and Frances Murphy Zauhar, introduction to *The Intimate Critique: Autobiographical Literary Criticism*, Eds. Diane P. Freedman, Olivia Frey, and Frances Murphy Zauhar (Durham: Duke UP, 1993), 8.

[2] It would be unfair of me to say that political opposition and dissent are completely absent in Singapore. Apart from the presence of a small number of political opposition parties and their leadership, a younger generation of Singaporeans, though still in the minority, is more willing to air its dissatisfaction with the ruling People's Action Party and its policies. For an interesting but slightly dated account of this growing resistance, see V. G. Kulkarni and Rodney Tasker, "Don't Talk Down to Us," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 11 July 1985, 34-37.

[3] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977), 201-2.

[4] Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991), 19.

[5] Quoted in Michael Elliot, "Crime and Punishment," *Newsweek*, 18 April 1994, 18.

[6] "A Flogging in Singapore," *The New York Times*, 2 April 1994, 18.

[7] The Clinton Administration responded by asking Singapore President Ong Teng Cheong to pardon Fay and show clemency.

[8] Note the tone of crisis in *Straits Times* columnist Chua Huck Cheng's warnings in response to a series of editorials from the *New York Times* condemning Singapore's actions: "Such an act by the country's most important newspaper [the *New York Times*] can have the unintended consequence of unleashing irrational passions when the caning is carried out, assuming no clemency is granted. . . . If harm comes to Singaporeans on American streets or Chinese-looking people in general on account of a stupid episode over a miscreant, would The New York Times search its soul?" Quoted in "Times Is Criticized Over Editorials," *The New York Times*, 17 April 1994, 10.

[9] Michael Hill and Lian Kwen Fee, *The Politics of Nation Building and Citizenship in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 1995), 23.

[10] Geraldine Heng and Janadas Devan, "State Fatherhood: The Politics of Nationalism, Sexuality, and Race in Singapore," *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, Eds. Andrew Parker et al. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 351.

[11] Quoted in Philip Shenon, "Singapore, the Tiger Whose Teeth Are Not Universally Scorned," *The New York Times*, 10 April 1994, E5.

[12] Frank Ching, "Fay Case: Collision of Values," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 5 May 1994, 38.

[13] In a *Newsweek* poll, 38% approve of the caning while 52% disapprove. Elliot, "Crime and Punishment," 19. The Singapore embassy capitalized on the "support" for the caning

reflected in this poll by stating that the phone calls it received from Americans were 60 to 40 in favor of the sentence. Susumu Awanohara, "Whipping Boy: Americans Get Worked Up About Michael Fay's Caning," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 28 April 1994, 25. Frank Ching of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* argues that the "unexpected support for punishment pronounced 'extreme' by Clinton is less a reflection of American approval for Singapore than dissatisfaction with their own society. The public is fed up with the crime and violence that characterise life in U.S. cities." Ching, "Fay Case," 38.

[14] "Condemn Singapore's Brutality," *The New York Times*, 10 April 1994, 18.

[15] "Time to Assert American Values," *The New York Times*, 13 April 1994, A20.

[16] Philip Shenon, "Overlooked Question in Singapore Caning Debate: Is the Teen-Ager Guilty?" *The New York Times*, 17 April 1994, 10.

[17] "No Mercy: Singapore Justice and American Reaction," *The Nation*, 25 April 1994, 543.

[18] See for instance, William J. Bennett, "Raising Cain on Values," Newsweek, 18 April 1994, 23.

[19] Quoted in "Bush Criticizes Caning but Likes Singapore," *The New York Times*, 16 April 1994, 4. Bush's praise of Singapore is troubling in that it is an implicit sanction of the Singapore government's argument that economic and social stability should transcend individual and political freedom. Bush's position is reminiscent of the support that the Reagan administration gave to numerous authoritarian governments around the world in order to "contain" Communism and to ensure the success of U.S. big business ventures in the Third World.

[20] "Condemn Singapore's Brutality," 18.

[21] Elliot's essay "Crime and Punisment" in *Newsweek* is an instance of the way the media has constructed a narrative of political progression—the Oriental cultures still resort to brutal and cruel modes of punishment, while the West has evolved in their approach to a more civilized penal code. The article even features a timeline that situates the various stages of the American penal system.

[22] Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993), 86.

[23] Ibid., 83.

[24] Ibid., 84.

[25] Ibid., 85.

[26] Ibid., 84.

[27] Fiona Cheong, *The Scent of the Gods* (New York: Norton, 1991), 50. Subsequent references to this work will be parenthetically documented.

[28] Conservative William Safire, the perennial nemesis of Lee Kuan Yew, calls him, in a quasi-sarcastic fashion, "the world's most intelligent, and to some most likable, despot." In an interview with Lee, Safire questions him on a number of sensitive issues (which remain off limits in Singapore's government-controlled *Straits Times*): the neutralization of political dissident Chee Soon Juan, the absence of free labor unions, the nepotism that appears in Lee Hsien Loong's (one of Lee's sons) rapid rise to power, and allusions to the law suits and caning practices that form the legal modus operandi of controlling dissent. William Safire, "The Dictator Speaks: A Chat with Lee Kuan Yew," *The Gainesville Sun*, 16 February 1999.

[29] King-kok Cheung, *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993), 4.

[30] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, Trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review P, 1971), 143.

[31] C. J. W.-L. Wee, "Contending with Primordialism: The 'Modern' Construction of Postcolonial Singapore," *positions* 1 (1993): 724.

[32] Thomas J. Bellows, "Bridging Tradition and Modernization: The Singapore Bureaucracy," *Confucianism and Economic Development: An Oriental Alternative?* Ed. Hung-chao Tai (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute P, 1989), 214.

[33] I am looking forward to Cheong's future work and how she will depict, if she so chooses to, the Singaporean American experience in the U.S. The problematic of political inertia has a special resonance for the Singaporean diasporic and it would be intriguing to examine a literary text that engages this issue in the context of American political ideals.

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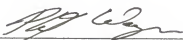
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