

Breaking Silences: Telling Asian American Female Subversive Stories in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*

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Abstract

The paradox of silence has been an on-going topic of interest in Asian American literary and critical analysis. In the dominant American cultural discourse, silence is often viewed as passivity and weakness while for people from non-Western cultures, silence can be a powerful and profound method of communication. As American-born female Chinese American writers, Maxine Hong Kingston (1940-) and Fae Myenne Ng (1956-) face dual marginalisation and subjugation in both the dominant American and Chinese American cultures. They are confronted with the “impulse to speak and the impulse not to speak” (Yamamoto 129). Keeping in mind King-Kok Cheung’s assertion that articulation rather than silence is the ultimate act of resistance against patriarchal and racist domination (“Don’t Tell” 400), I examine how Kingston and Ng confront the silence that undermines their agency as female and marginalised subjects through the development of an eloquent female discourse. Through their retelling of family and communal stories from female perspectives, I demonstrate how their breaking of silence is an act of disruption and resistance against erasure by their dual cultural traditions and American political and institutional apparatuses.

Keywords

Silence, female agency, model minority, Asian American writing/literature, Maxine Hong Kingston, Fae Myenne Ng

The Politics of Silence

In her seminal work *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*, Cheryl Glenn eloquently states: “Like speech, the meaning of silence depends on a power differential that exists in every rhetorical situation: who can speak, who must remain silent, who

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listens, and what these listeners can do” (9). In “Different silences,” Traise Yamamoto explores the paradoxical nuances of silences in both her Japanese American culture and the dominant American culture. She notes that, on the one hand, the appreciation for the beauty of silence and the belief that silence sometimes “articulates what speech cannot” are deeply rooted in her Japanese American heritage (133); on the other hand, silence is an act of silencing, an act of keeping the inside stories within socially defined boundaries. She writes:

The boundaries begin with oneself, then the family (“This is family business,” my Nisei mother would say, ‘and you are not to go blabbing it around to the outside’), then ring gradually outward: must stay within the Japanese American community, the Asian American community. What belongs within must stay within: don’t lose face, don’t spill your guts, don’t wear your heart on your sleeve.... Boundaries. Self-containment: don’t bother other people... no use calling so much attention to oneself, to one’s family; no use to shame others, both inside and outside. (129)

Trinh T. Minh-ha asserts: “Within the context of women’s speech silence has many faces” (372). King-Kok Cheung also believes that “While the importance of voice is indisputable, pronouncing silence as the converse of speech or as its subordinate can also be oppressively univocal” (6). Confronted with the intricate meanings of silence, Yamamoto comments, “To be silent is to give in, to not-face and so to lose face; to be silent is what is expected of ‘a Chinese lady’” (127). As members of a racial minority and coming from a cultural background that differs in interpretations of the meaning of silence, Maxine Hong Kingston and Fae Myenne Ng, like Yamamoto, are constantly being pulled from the “impulse to speak and the impulse to not speak” (Yamamoto 129). The aforementioned multiple nuances of silence and what Valerie Ooka Pang refers to as “oppressive silence” are also pervasive in the Chinese and Chinese American cultural traditions captured by Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1976) and Fae Myenne Ng’s *Bone* (1993).

Lisa Lowe, Bill Ong Hing, Stanford Lyman and many other scholars on US immigration history have pointed out that Chinese Americans have been systematically silenced and excluded from American society by discriminatory policies and legislatures. More than half a century of Chinese exclusion from American soil, anti-miscegenation laws, extremely limited quotas of Chinese women immigrants into the United States, and the denial of naturalisation rights were strategies to make Chinese Americans “perpetual foreigners” and to exterminate them in the end. According to Timothy P. Fong, when twenty-one Chinese Americans in Los Angeles and twenty-eight in Rock Springs, Wyoming were massacred in 1871 and 1885 respectively, Chinese Americans were denied the right to testify in court (16). Discriminatory laws and violence were used to

silence the protests and rebellions of Chinese Americans. Ingeniously and silently, Chinese Americans invented “paper sons” and used immigration loopholes to protest and combat the genocide. Fully aware of the exterminating power of racism, Chinese Americans resorted to silence as a form of protest and resistance. As Yamamoto points out, “silence is part of speaking; silence is also habit, protection” (130). Though superficially silent to institutional discrimination, Chinese Americans, from the very onset of their immigration to the United States, have used stories and other literary means to document their insurmountable hardship and to voice their protest against unjust treatments. Lu Xun, a famous Chinese writer, once said that people either erupt out of silence or die in silence. Chinese Americans have erupted in silence. Over 135 Chinese poems scribbled on the walls of the Angel Island Wooden Barracks are angry and frustrated voices of Chinese immigrants who were treated “like animals, tortured and destroyed at others’ whim” (Hom 145). The following poem bears testimony to Chinese immigrants’ angry outbursts against a nation that champions liberty and equality for all:

So, liberty is your national principle;
Why do you practice autocracy?
You don’t uphold justice, you Americans,
You detain me in prison, guard me closely.
Your officers are wolves and tigers, all ruthless, all wanting to bite me.
An innocent man implicated, such an injustice!
When can I get out of this prison and free my mind? (Hom 153)

Poems from the Angel Island Wooden Barracks and many other literary works by Chinese Americans are powerful means to break the silence imposed on Chinese Americans. Kingston and Ng have heralded this Chinese American literary tradition and continued the fight to give a voice to the voiceless, and to break the imposed silence through their literary works.

Caught between two cultures and being products of both, Kingston and Ng must negotiate the contradictions between their two worlds before discovering and valorising their individual uniqueness. Coming from an ancestral culture that believes “silence garnisheth a woman” and living in a society that has strategically silenced racial minorities through racist immigration policies and socio-economic subjugations (qtd. in Garner 117), Kingston and Ng are confronted with the fate of being doubly silenced. In mainstream American culture, the silence of Asian American women has been interpreted as passive acceptance of gender and racial oppression. For Kingston and Ng, silence is

[S]omething to be broken, shattered, shredded; it is something solid through which one must pass in order to join one’s voice to the voices on the other

side. It sits stone-heavy in the body, or is a stifling enclosure within which the body suffocates.” (Yamamoto 131)

Like their Chinese American predecessors, Kingston and Ng use the act of writing and storytelling to break, shatter and shred the silence that has been imposed on them by patriarchal and racist institutions. Through their literary works, Kingston and Ng explore the double bind of articulating the female voice in cultures that ordain silence as the appropriate expression of submission and femininity. Carmello Virgillo and Naomi Lindstrom’s analysis of the silence imposed on Latin American women in Latin American literature is applicable to the study of Kingston and Ng:

Women have generally been considered silent figures, submissive to the patriarchal powers that govern their society, whether they be the fathers of the family or of the Church. Women’s real distance from the centres of power can be translated linguistically as a restriction on the production of discourse in literary texts. (44)

For Kingston and Ng, the act of storytelling and writing serves as a rhetorical strategy to expose and counter androcentric and racist subjugations that circumscribe “acceptable” behaviour. Malini Schueller points out, for minority women writers, “the very act of speaking involves breaking through the gender and race barriers that suppress voicing from the margins” (423). Dalia Rodriguez also states that “silence and silencing are gendered, raced, and classed” (412). Through the breaking of silence, Kingston and Ng confront their role as subjugated women within both the Chinese American and mainstream American patriarchy, and their role as members of an ethnic minority in America. Through bonding with and distancing themselves from their ancestral Chinese culture, Chinese American and mainstream American cultures, both Kingston and Ng articulate the silence that has been imposed on them, their characters and Chinese American communities.

Breathing Life into the Dead and Forgotten: Maxine Hong Kingston’s Talk-stories

In her examination of Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, feminist literary critic Khani Begum states, “[T]he first step toward self-actualization and identity requires a facility with language and the power to speak” (145). However, King-Kok Cheung points out in “Self-Fulfilling Visions in *The Woman Warrior* and *Thousand Pieces of Gold*” that the act of speaking out/up is no easy task for the oppressed and disenfranchised. She asserts, “[F]or those besieged by silence, self-expression is a heroic act, a breakthrough into verbal power” (148). Throughout *The Woman Warrior*,

Kingston centres on the claiming of verbal power through the telling of subversive stories. She begins her text with her mother's cautionary warning and the story of her nameless aunt – the story of Kingston's aunt who transgressed the sexual boundaries established by Chinese patriarchy and gave birth to an illegitimate child while her husband was in the United States. Kingston writes:

'You must not tell anyone,' my mother said, 'what I am about to tell you. In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. We say that your father has all brothers because it is as if she had never been born.' (3)

The mother perpetuates the oppression of women through the cautionary tale. Her warning and tone enforce the authority and legitimacy of patriarchy to control women. Kingston acknowledges her complicity in her aunt's punishment because she believed in her mother's interpretation of the aunt's story and the dangers of unrepressed female sexuality. Kingston's complicity reinforces the silencing of women and the erasure of her aunt's name and existence. Kingston confesses:

I have believed that sex was unspeakable and words so strong and fathers so frail that 'aunt' would do my father mysterious harm. I have thought that my family, having settled among immigrants who had also been their neighbours in the ancestral land, needed to clean their name, and a wrong word would incite the kinspeople even here. But there is more to this silence: they want me to participate in her punishment. And I have. In the twenty years since I heard this story I have not asked for details nor said my aunt's name; I do not know it.... The real punishment was not the raid swiftly inflicted by the villagers, but the family's deliberately forgetting her. Her betrayal so maddened them, they saw to it that she would suffer forever, even after death. (16)

Words have the power "to punish and to liberate" (Cheung, "Self-Fulfilling" 148). With her name forbidden to relatives, the memory of her forcibly erased, the aunt might as well never have been born. The imposed silence on the nameless aunt is a form of punishment for her sexual transgression and for challenging the Confucian female decorum; Kingston could be punished for "engaging in another form of forbidden creativity" (Cheung, "Self-Fulfilling" 148) – the telling of the forbidden tale. However, she proceeds with the storytelling, aiding her aunt by reinstating her volition.

The existence of Kingston's aunt is silenced by Kingston's family. Jill M. Parrott believes that while the story of Kingston's nameless aunt is used as a "reinforcement of cultural mores, she is not spoken of – that which represented her is no more. Although the legend of the woman's downfall continues as a

form of social control, the name does not” (378). Kingston reclaims her nameless aunt through remembering, storytelling and writing. Telling the whole world her aunt’s story is a radical act of breaking the silence that was imposed on her as well as on her No Name aunt. It is Kingston’s way of fighting back, of being a “word warrior” (Allen 51). It signifies Kingston’s refusal to participate in the punishment of her aunt, and it “breaks the circle of shame” (Garner 121). Recreating her aunt’s story demonstrates not only Kingston’s sanction of her aunt’s defiance, but also her challenge to sexual oppression and patriarchal subjugation.

Cheung notes that Kingston’s restitution of her aunt frees her from “her parents’ countless taboos and give rein to her own creativity” (148). Her breaking of silence signifies the emergence of a new, rebellious self, a self that realises that her family’s silence about her aunt, her father’s refusal to acknowledge the aunt’s existence, and her own silence are continued punishment of her aunt. Kingston restores her aunt in her story from “eternal cold and silence” (Kingston 14). Instead of casting her as just a sexual victim, Kingston imagines her as a woman who sought a private life, secret and apart from the villagers (Kingston 13). She imagines her aunt as someone who had a “secret voice” (Kingston 11), who let “her dreams grow and fade and after some months or years went toward what persisted” (Kingston 8). She imagines her aunt determined to keep the man’s name to herself, to give “silent birth” (Kingston 11), and to kill herself and her new-born baby in silence in the family well. She also imagines her aunt’s silence as a “female weapon of vengeance” (Smith 155). Kingston’s wayward aunt is her “forerunner” in the construction of her identities (Kingston 8).

As Sidonie Smith points out, Kingston’s telling of her aunt’s disruptive story establishes a space where female desire and self-representation can emerge (156). Foucault states in *Archaeology of Knowledge*, “Indeed, it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together” (100). Kingston’s revival of her dead aunt’s story is an indictment against the strict Confucian female decorum of the Three Obediences and Four Virtues. She instils power and agency in not only her aunt but also herself through the telling of this forbidden story. In an interview with Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Kingston states: “I realized by writing about her I gave her back life and a place in history and maybe immortality” (786).

As a woman and member of a racial minority, Kingston is burdened with the task of finding out how the “invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America” (Kingston 5). In her construction of her own identities, Kingston invents and reinterprets stories from Chinese history to fit her American reality. One of these stories is the legend of Fa Mulan, the heroic woman warrior who disguised herself as a man and fought on her ailing father’s behalf to defend her country. In the Chinese original, Fa Mulan is the female

spokesperson of Confucian ethics and defender of patriarchy. Kingston's Fa Mulan, however, is a "female avenger" who had her own army, and to whom the villagers gave their "real gifts – their sons" (Kingston 43, 36). Unlike her counterpart, Kingston does not resort to violence to avenge herself. Instead she uses words and stories as her weapons to perform a different kind of heroic act – to turn a story of "perfect filiality" into a subversive story glorifying female self-assertion and female prowess (Kingston 45). King-Kok Cheung comments, "In projecting a self who prevails through words rather than through physical violence, Kingston not only redefines heroism but revises the American stereotype of the quiet and submissive Oriental woman ("Self-Fulfilling" 151).

Kingston's reconstruction of the legendary but now much ignored story of Fa Mulan forges a close bond between the woman warrior and Kingston herself. Kingston writes:

The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them. What we have in common are the words at our backs.... The reporting is the vengeance – not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words. (53)

With the woman warrior as her role model, Kingston fights against sexual degradation and racial discrimination in her American life. She rejects the traditional female roles of being a quiet "wife and a slave" (20), and decides to be a loud "bad girl" and a lumberjack. Challenging the Confucian maxim that "it is better for a woman to have virtue than talent," she brings home straight "A"s. She also refuses to type invitations for her racist boss. Though she acknowledges that "nobody in history has conquered and united both North America and Asia" (Kingston 49), Kingston attempts to do so through her version of the Fa Mulan story. As a self-proclaimed descendant of this powerful woman warrior, Kingston feels confident that she can undertake the task. Her rewriting of the story of Fa Mulan is a source of female empowerment, and "an expression of and a means to the author's understanding of her female position in a male chauvinist society" (Lim, "Twelve Asian American Writers" 69).

Kingston's tale of her mother, the same woman who commands Kingston to abide by the ethics of Chinese patriarchy, enunciates the power of woman. In Kingston's text, her mother Brave Orchid resists the erasure of her selfhood and pursues a traditionally masculine profession as a medical doctor in a country where "not many women get to live the daydream of women" (Kingston 61). Like the story of Fa Mulan, Brave Orchid's story is full of vignettes testifying to her bravery and extraordinariness. Of Brave Orchid's confrontation with the Sitting Ghost, Kingston writes:

My mother may have been afraid, but she would be a dragoness ("my totem, your totem"). She could make herself not weak. During danger she fanned

out her dragon claws and riffled her red sequin scales and unfolded her coiling green stripes. Danger was a good time for showing off. Like the dragons living in temple eaves, my mother looked down on plain people who were lonely and afraid. (67)

Brave Orchid's story resonates with that of Fa Mulan. Her victory in defeating the sitting Ghost and other invisible ghosts in China and the United States testifies to her claim of being "brave and good" and having "bodily strength and control" (Kingston 73). Like Fa Mulan, who had her band of swordswomen, Brave Orchid's bravery also won her the support and admiration of her classmates – the "new women, scientists who changed the rituals" (Kingston 75). Even after she moved to America, though "fallen" from the prestige of a doctor to being a laundress, Brave Orchid proclaims that she is "the one with the big muscles" and that her husband could not have supported the family without her (Kingston 104). The "fall" of her mother questions the idea of America as a land of equal opportunity where anyone can achieve success and exposes the socio-economic injustices against Chinese Americans.

Schueller points out, "the anxiety of articulation is also peculiarly a racial one" (423). Breaking the taboos of female eloquence, Kingston intertwines writing with the act of talking-story to find her own voice and negotiate her identity. The racial and sexual powerlessness and silence – both political and linguistic – that was imposed on Chinese Americans were contested throughout Kingston's text. The last story Kingston tells in her book deals with her search for a voice of her own – her identity. The difficulty of her search climaxes in her outburst in the girls' restroom. Kingston knows that "silence has to do with being a Chinese girl," and identifies with the quiet Chinese girl at her American school because she also had trouble speaking herself (Kingston 166). The vivid and tormenting accounts of Kingston's struggles to break the silence within herself and the quiet girl are symbolic of the obstacles Chinese American women must overcome in order to be heard as individuals and as members of an ethnic group. Kingston's process of self-construction culminates in the story about the second century poetess Ts'ai Yen. In the Chinese original of *Hu Chia Shih Pa P'ai* (*Eighteen Stanzas of a Barbarian Reed Pipe*), the tone is pessimistic and desolate, the poet an unwilling captive in the land of the Southern Hsiung-nu (the Huns). In Kingston's version, Ts'ai Yen stands for the exile, the unwilling immigrant, who must learn to survive in the midst of an alien culture and a language not her own. As David Leiwei Li points out, the gloominess in the Chinese original is lifted (510-11) and replaced by Kingston's celebration of the poetess's eloquence. The poetess fights like a woman warrior. She "cut[s] down anyone in her path during the madness of close combat" (Kingston 208). Though she does not speak the language of her captors, the Hsiung-nu, she

communicates with them and her sons who cannot speak Chinese with songs. Kingston writes:

Ts'ai Yen sang about China and her family there. Her words seemed to be Chinese, but the barbarians understood their sadness and anger. Sometimes they thought they could catch barbarian phrases about forever wandering. Her children did not laugh, but eventually sang along when she left her tent to sit by the winter campfires, ringed by barbarians. (209)

Kingston turns the sad songs into “a hopeful cultural resolution” (Shostak 243). When Ts'ai Yen returned to her own land and her own people, “she brought her songs back from the savage lands, and one of the three that has been passed down to us is ‘Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,’ a song that Chinese sing to their own instruments. It translated well” (Kingston 209). Shostak believes that Kingston’s reinvention of Ts'ai Yen’s story “gains new resonances that bear specifically on Chinese American experiences of immigration and acculturation” (244).

As a Chinese American woman living between two worlds, Kingston uses her stories as expressions of the search for personal and communal cultural identities. As Veronica Wong points out, “what emerges is a new and vital self that transforms all fragmentary distortions into a dynamic whole” (31). Through the telling of the stories of her real and imagined female predecessors, Kingston breaks the silences and “talks stories” that are communal and individual.

Shattering the Myth of America’s Model Minority

Exposing the fallacy of America’s model minority, Fae Myenne Ng recovers and retells the stories of her family and those of her working-class Chinese immigrant community in her ground-breaking novel *Bone*. In an interview, Ng talks about growing up in San Francisco’s Chinatown and speaks sympathetically about the Chinese immigrants in her community: “We were young children.... I witnessed how hard they worked, how alone they were at the end of their lives without the comfort of family. I thought someone should tell their story” (Hunnewell 9). Leila, Ng’s narrator, weaves her “affectionate knowledge of an insider and the observant unsentimentality of an outsider” (Kakutani 26), and explores her sense of self and community through the breaking of silence about the lives of her family and those of many working-class Chinese immigrants. Leila struggles to define her own individuality and to live her own life while being readily available for her mother Dulcie and stepfather Leon. Both Dulcie and Leon depend on her as an intermediary to the world outside of Chinatown. Like Kingston, Ng was also warned by her parents not to tell anyone the family’s immigration secrets due to their fear of being deported to China. Ng tries to disrupt the silencing of her family’s and community’s stories as she seeks in her narrative “to name the unspeakable,” to

borrow Kingston's phrase (6), and to give voice to what has been silenced by the myth of the successful model minority and the dominant American institutional apparatuses.

The stories Leila tells about her family and Chinatown are drastically different from what appears "from inside those dark Greyhound buses" and "what tourists come to see" (Ng 145). Ng is not interested in "reviving the storehouse of Orientalist or mythic fantasies of Chinatown – the lurid or sensationalist tales of tong wars, prostitution, gambling, and opium dens often identified with mainstream Chinatown representations" (Ho 208), or depicting what appears to be exotic to the outside world, "the spidery writing on store signs, the dressed-up street lamps with their pagoda tops, the oddly matched colors: red with green, green with aqua blue, yellow with pink" (Ng 144). Instead, she engages in the recovery and reconstruction of the insiders' stories, those that have been silenced by what Frank Chin refers to as "racist love" and institutional discrimination. *Bone's* central narrative concerns the life of the Leong family in San Francisco's Chinatown even though Ng interweaves Chinese American immigration history into her stories. Ho suggests that Ng's frequent references to actual street and place names such as the San Fran Hotel enhance the authenticity of her stories. Ng makes San Francisco's Chinatown "the actual lived spaces in the psychosocial and geopolitical formation of Asian American history" (Ho 209).

Challenging the myth of Asian Americans as America's "model minority," Ng does not tell the "success" stories of the Chinese immigrant family and community. In her portrayals of the Leong family's trials and tribulations, Ng uses simple, honest and stark language to capture the effects of racial, sexual and class discrimination confronted by poor working-class Chinese Americans. Through the sad and sometimes tragic life stories of the Leong family and those of many other Chinese Americans, Ng challenges the dominant culture's representation of Chinese American successes and breaks the silence about the economic and psychological hardships and injustices suffered by Chinese Americans in her community. Her narrative of the Leong family and their community counters discourses that erase socio-economic differences among Chinese Americans and make invisible the experiences of poor, working class Chinese Americans. Leila reveals that she and her siblings have been warned not to "tell this and don't tell that.... We graduated from keeping their secrets to keeping our own" (Ng 112). Leila breaks the vow to secrecy, and engages in eloquent story-telling to honour her family and community. Her stories make "visible what the larger culture would prefer not to acknowledge" (Ho 211).

In "Racist Love," Frank Chin and Jeffery Chan state, "Each racial stereotype comes in two models, the acceptable model and the unacceptable model" (65). Elaine Kim notes that the dominant culture's stereotypes of Chinese Americans have changed from the evil Yellow Peril, "the power-hungry

despot, the helpless heathen, the sensuous dragon lady, the comical loyal servant, and the pudgy, desexed detective who talks about Confucius” to a successful model minority (3). Chin and Chan further note,

The general function of any racial stereotype is to establish and preserve order between different elements of society, maintain the continuity and growth of Western civilization, and enforce white supremacy with a minimum of effort, attention, and expense. The ideal racial stereotype is a low maintenance engine of white supremacy whose efficiency increases with age, as it becomes “authenticated” and historically verified. (66)

According to Elaine Kim, the stereotypes emphasise the “permanent and irreconcilable” differences between Anglo and Chinese Americans and permanently render Chinese Americans as the Other in America (4). Chin and Chan state that since World War II, the dominant culture’s projections of Chinese Americans have shifted from “racist hate” to “racist love” (65). Peter Kwong believes that the shift is a result of increasing social and economic problems in the United States. He notes that many Americans

have turned with envy to the immigrants’ attitude toward hard work, disciplined reliance on their own family and ethnic resources, and nondependency on public assistance. The dynamic growth of ethnic Chinese immigrant enclaves seems an ideal alternative to the poverty and deprivation of African American ghettos. (135)

The “racist love” model minority myth created by the dominant culture still represents Chinese Americans as one dimensional, monolithic beings. It silences the institutional discriminations and heart-breaking hardships Chinese Americans have endured since their arrival in the United States. Ng’s text captures the narrator’s family’s economic and psychological devastations to counter the model minority discourse.

Years of hard work have deformed the narrator’s mother Dulcie’s body. As a seamstress in a garment factory, “work was her whole life, and every forward stitch marked time passing” (Ng 163). The narrative about Leila’s mother takes place within the sphere of family and work. Wendy Ho points out, the familial site is merged intimately with the economic one for the immigrants in Chinatown (213). The family sphere is made “an additional site of labor” (Lowe 168). Leila says,

Mah was too busy even to look up when I offered her lunch. She said she didn’t have an appetite, so I put the aluminum packet of food on the water pipe, where it’d stay warm, and her thermos on the already-filled communal eating table.

Back home, I started with the darts. I sewed the facing to the interfacing, the front to the back; then I had trouble with the zipper. I wasn't used to the slick gabardine fabric; my seams didn't match up, and the needle kept sliding over to the metal teeth. I undid the seam and tried again. This time the needle hit the metal zipper tab and jammed. I gave up afraid I might break the needle. Mah broke a needle once and its tip flew up and lodged so close to her eye that Luday and Soon-ping had to walk her over to Chinese Hospital. (178-79)

The dominant culture's discourse of the "model minority's" economic prosperity is questioned by Ng's exposition of the exploitation of immigrants and their economic scarcity. The romanticised family life of the "model minority" is anything but ideal. Ng writes:

Most of my students are recent immigrants. Both parents work. Swing shift. Graveyard. Seamstress. Dishwasher. Janitor. Waiter. One job bleeds into another. They have enough worries, and they don't like me coming in and telling them they have one more. Being inside their cramped apartments depresses me. I'm reminded that we've lived like that, too. The sewing machine next to the television, the rice bowls stacked on the table, the rolled-up blankets pushed to one side of the sofa. Cardboard boxes everywhere, rearranged and used as stools or tables or homework desks. The money talk at dinnertime, the list of things they don't know or can't figure out. Cluttered rooms. Bare lives. Every day I'm reminded nothing's changed about making a life or raising kids. Everything is hard. (16-17)

Under the disguise of ideal family life and economic successes, many working-class Chinese immigrants live a life of toil and humiliation with the hope that the younger generation can live better. Dulcie and the ladies at the garment factory "pushed their endurance, long hours and then longer nights, as they strained to slip one more seam under the stamping needle" (Ng 177). For Dulcie, marriage is "for survival" and a partnership of toil (Ng 34), life an endless string of worries about green cards, failed businesses, limited language skills and having enough money to feed the children. Wendy Ho notes that Dulcie and Leon's marriage "reflects the lack of social-economic and political options for subordinated racial-ethnic families in U.S. society," and it is not a model minority marriage defined by the mainstream culture's ideal family discourse (224). As a witness to Dulcie's daily struggle for survival and her confidante, Leila asks, "[I]s their discontent without reason?" (Ng 34).

Wendy Ho notes that "Leon is an integral part of that social history of the transitional formations of family, community, and culture in San Francisco's Chinatown and it is important to recover his story" (216). Ng recovers Leon's and many other immigrants' hidden stories and "immigration secrets" in the

United States. Since 1882 the United States Congress has passed a series of Chinese Exclusion acts to bar entry of Chinese immigrants. In 1862, 1870 and 1885 several immigration acts were passed that levied a special tax on Chinese immigrants in order to protect “free white labor against competition with Chinese coolie labor” (Chan, *Asian Americans* 54). Like many Chinese male immigrants, Leon came to the United States in 1940 as a “paper son” of Grandpa Leong with the hope of making enough money to go back to China and the promise of repatriating his “paper father’s” bones after his death. Chinatown was a bachelor’s society because many Chinese immigrants could not afford to raise a family, or return to China. Many of them spent their lives “all alone and lost” (Ng 7). Leon has worked two or three jobs day and night just to survive. As Leila discovers under Leon’s humorous disguise, there is another Leon whose life is full of “We Don’t Want You” letters and “heart hollerings” (Ng 7). When searching for Leon’s legal documents to qualify him for social security, Leila recalls

I lifted the suitcase up on to the kitchen table and opened it. The past came up: a moldy, water-damaged paper smell and a parchment texture. The letters were stacked by year and rubberbanded into decades. I only had to open the first few to know the story: “We Don’t Want You.”

A rejection from the army: unfit.

A job rejection: unskilled.

An apartment: unavailable.

My shoulders tightened and I thought about having a scotch. Leon had made up stories for us; so that we could laugh, so that we could understand the rejections.

Now, seeing the written reasons in a formal letter, the stories came back, without the humor, without hope. On paper Leon was not the hero. (57-58)

The rejection letters document Leon’s fifty years of humiliation and degradation in a country that perceives him as an outsider and illegal alien. Like many Chinese immigrants who entered the United States as “paper sons” or “paper daughters,” Leon has to keep his real identity a secret. He was “always getting his real and paper birthdates mixed up; he’s never given the same birthdate twice” (Ng 55). However, more than forty years of living on fake identities backfired when he went to apply for social security and “the laws that excluded him now held him captive” (Ng 57). Leon faces rejection again!

In the face of rejections, humiliations and injustices, Leila retorts, “All the letters addressed to Leon should prove to the people at the social security office that this country was his place, too. Leon had paid; Leon had earned his rights. American dollars. American time. These letters marked his time and they marked his endurance” (Ng 58). Leila wants to remember Leon as a hero because even though his life is full of unfulfilled dreams and devastating

economic and emotional hardships in “America, this lie of a country” (Ng 103), he remains a feisty fighter for the survival of his family. The telling of his story is Leila’s way of remembering him as a father, a workingman, a family man and a hero. “All I have are those memories, and I want to remember them all” (Ng 61).

Through the telling of the immigrants’ heart-wrenching stories, Ng creates an alternative and oppositional story and overwrites the dominant discourse that silences the hardships, racism and institutional violence against Chinese Americans of different socio-economic and educational backgrounds. Leon’s story “speaks of the poor, subordinated and racialized individuals and communities (the San Fran or the Ping Yuen projects) that are neglected, thrown out, by American society” (Ho 226).

There are silences within her Chinatown community that Leila must break in order to negotiate her identity as a bilingual and bicultural Chinese American woman. According to her parents’ old Cantonese cultural values, Leila’s telling of her middle sister Ona’s suicide, her family’s financial hardship, her parents’ stormy relationship, her mother’s adulterous affair, her premarital sexual relationship with Mason, her younger sister Nina’s abortion are acts of transgression and constitutes the betrayal of her family and community. Confucian propriety commands each family member to act appropriately to save the family’s “face.” It forbids the airing of one’s family’s dirty laundry in the open. Confucian propriety also believes that female assertion is unfeminine and must be silenced. Like the forbidden story of Kingston’s nameless aunt the suicide of the narrator’s middle sister Ona is not to be mentioned either: “Ona has become a kind of silence in our lives. We don’t talk about her. We don’t have anything more to say” (Ng 15). But nobody in the family can forget about Ona. Leila needs to tell her story not only because the act of telling will help her family to heal and to move forward despite the tragedy, but also it will help her regain her voice and agency in the construction of her own identities.

According to Leila, Ona’s name means peace in her parents’ dialect; she is always cheerful and forward-looking and acts as a peace-maker between family members. She is the one closest to Leon and she is a good example of a Confucian filial daughter. Goellnicht notes that Ona is “the embodiment of the community’s connection to Chinese traditions and rituals” (320). However, when Leon refuses to let her continue her romantic relationship with Osvaldo, the son of Leon’s former business partner, Ona disobeys her father and runs away with Osvaldo. Leon becomes extremely “old world” about Ona’s disobedience and threatens to disown her (Ng 170). Feeling displaced outside of Chinatown and not having “an out” (Ng 173), Ona commits suicide. Since Leon and Mah have lived through years of humiliation so that their offspring can have their American dream, Ona’s suicide becomes the death of her parents’ unfulfilled American dream. Goellnicht notes, “Ona’s death by suicide becomes

for Leon and Mah the sign for both their failure to win 'America' and of their failure to hold onto 'China' in 'America,' the symbol of the broken body of the traditional family" (320). Her suicide also records the difficult and painful family life of many working-class Chinese immigrants, challenging the authority of the Chinese patriarchy and the valorisation of the ideal "model minority" family values and life. Ona's defiance against Leon's wishes and Leila's retelling of the friction within the family present "the disempowering of a central male figure" (Lim, *Writing* 580). Through these stories, Ng questions the validity of traditional Chinese cultural and familial values in America, and attempts to negotiate a reconciliation between the Chinese "old world ways" and the American reality (Ng 170).

Telling the stories of her community and family help Ng negotiate and form new identities. Leila says, "To let go, I know we had to let our memories out" (Ng 129). As a bridge between her students and their parents, a mediator between Leon and Mah, Chinatown and the world outside of Chinatown, Leila shuttles back and forth between two different worlds, two different traditions. Having "a whole different vocabulary of feeling in English than in Chinese, and not everything can be translated" (19), being caught between old and new cultural and familial values and "being locked into living Mah's and Leon's lives for them" (Ng 112), Leila experiences tremendous emotional distress while trying to construct her sense of self as an individual. Though she feels that her community, Salmon Alley is the only safe place, she finds that she needs "a change of scenery" and the atmosphere outside of Chinatown helps her "relax" (Ng 120, 115, 26). Leila's final decision to move out of Chinatown to be with the man she loves is the only thing that she has done for herself throughout Ng's entire text. The image of the dutiful, submissive and filial daughter is questioned and disrupted. It is symbolic of her attempt to reconcile the conflicts between the old and new worlds, traditional Chinese and contemporary American cultural and familial values. As Leon says, "The heart never travels" (Ng 193), Leila leaves her family and her community with the memories of the living and the dead. Remembering the past gives Leila power in the present. The telling of her family and communal stories helps Leila realise how deeply rooted she is in her community and how urgent it is for her to forge new identities in order to meet the challenges of the constantly shifting cultural, socio-economic and political dynamics.

The Power of Story-telling

Heather Bruce asserts that the "orchestration of silence" is associated with the "blotting out, erasure, and devaluing of women's political, textual, literary, and historic past" (171). Through Kingston's and Ng's narratives of Chinese American legacies, Chinese Americans who have had a long history of being excluded from the dominant American historical, political and literary

discourses are erupting out of their “historical silences” (Duncan viii). Kingston and Ng use story-telling as a venue for assertion, survival and liberation, and break the silences imposed on them by their ethnic community and the dominant American society. Their telling of forbidden stories is not only a powerful act of disruption and resistance to dominant cultural, racial and sexual discourses, but also an assertion of their Chinese American female identities. Through their resistant literary explorations, King and Ng have constructed alternative versions of Chinese American history that not only explicitly break the imposed silences but also offer different ways of examining why political, historical and literary erasures occurred in the first place.

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