Cities and Sites of Contradictions: Contemporary Chinese American Poetry

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ABSTRACT

This essay begins with a summary of the teaching of Asian American literature in the U.S. and the continued neglect of poetry. Then the relationship of Chinese American identity to the concept of "Asian American" is explored along with the changing political and social conditions that have contributed to the increasing diversification of Asian American poetry. Then historical background on the rapidly growing Chinese American population is provided. The essay presents the argument that because previous generations focused on issues of heritage, identity, discrimination, immigrant alienation, family continuity, and language, Chinese American poets today may feel a greater sense of freedom in addressing whatever themes or topics appeal to their drive for poetic expression. That argument is followed by a reading of several individual poets, grouped into three categories: pan-Asian politics, immigrant authors, and Hawai'ian Islands' Chinese Americans, plus consideration of a poet whose mixed ethnicity complicates the very categories established here. Fay Chiang and Nellie Wong are treated in the first category; Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Li-Young Lee, and Marilyn Chin in the second one; Eric Chock and Wing Tek Lum in the third category; and Cathy Song is treated as the mixed ethnicity example. The essay concludes with the argument that for many Chinese American poets there is a living heritage and a cultural continuity through growth and reinvigoration and a hope in the possibility of cultural inclusiveness based on combining multigenerational and multiethnic experience.

KEY WORDS

Asian American
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Nellie Wong
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Eric Chock
Wing Tek Lum
Cathy Song
The Phoenix Gone, The Terrace Empty
Hawai'ian Islands Chinese Americans
Expounding the Doubtful Points
Frameless Windows, Squares of Light
Historical Background
Fay Chiang
In the City of Contradictions
The Death of Long Steam Lady
Shirley Geok-lin Lim
The City in Which I love You
Dwarf Bamboo
Last Days Here
Picture Bride
School Figures

Introduction

Twenty-five years ago in the United States a college professor would have been unable to assign an American literature anthology that included a Chinese American poet. But today, anthologies of American literature contain a range of works not only by the white men traditionally studied but also by women and various ethnic minorities. Public and academic attention to minority American writers has proceeded in waves over the past three decades, with the most attention initially given to African American literature, followed by Native American, Latino, and, finally, Asian American literature. As a result, Asian American literature has received the least criticism to date.

While many professors will include individual poems by Asian Americans in survey courses, and others might use an Asian American literature anthology in an ethnic studies or multicultural literature course, relatively few assign an entire volume of poetry by an Asian American author. And far fewer professors have gone the extra step to publish articles about such poetry (see Chang 82-83). So, while the secondary bibliography on Asian American literature has become quite substantial, most of the articles and books focus on fiction. Before addressing that issue in more detail, I would like to explain my use of the label "Asian American literature."

Asian American

The African American civil rights movement that gained in-

creasing momentum with efforts to end segregation in the 1950s and expanded into the affirmative action politics of the 1960s led to the development of special admissions programs for *racial* minorities as defined by the federal government. The sudden appearance of such previously nontraditional students on college campuses led to the formation of ethnic studies programs. On most college campuses, then, one could study African American, Chicano, or Asian American literature in an ethnic studies program years before such courses were offered in English Departments.

Because of the particular politics, then, involved in the establishment of the study of ethnic literatures, and because of the relatively small number of literary works available in paperback, the tendency developed to teach Asian American literature rather than the literature of separate ethnic groups. The politics of the day actually encouraged such a tendency because in the struggle against discrimination there clearly existed the sense that strength was to be found in numbers. Activists and authors tended, and still tend in many cases, to promote a pan-Asian identity based on the commonalties of shared suffering. Further, widespread opposition among young Asian Americans to the war in Indochina reinforced the sense of a need for pan-Asian solidarity.

George Uba in "Versions of Identity in Post-Activist Asian American Poetry" makes the point that in the 1960s and 1970s Asian American activist poetry embraced a type of tribalism as "a common way of negotiating identity . . . . It was a means of resisting the assimilationist ethic for so long spreading insidiously across the American ethnic landscape" (35). But, "in the wake of the profound demographic changes affecting Asian America, changes which have resulted in a diversity unimaginable twenty years ago, the reification of the 'tribal' has become increasingly problematic" (35). And King-Kok Cheung observes that whereas identity politics—with its stress on cultural nationalism and American nativity—governed earlier theoretical and critical formulations, the stress is now on heterogeneity and diaspora" (1).

The diversity that Uba refers to has, in fact, complicated the

very definition of Asian American used in constructing literature courses and anthologies. For example, initially Asian American meant Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino, and then it was expanded to include Koreans. Then, in the 1970s there was a sudden influx of southeast Asian peoples, and more recently there has been a large scale migration of people from south Asian countries. Not having been present in significant numbers in the 1960s and 1970s, these groups do not share in the sense of pan-Asian identity that initially generated the perception of what it meant to be Asian American.

Such diversification does not necessarily mean that the term Asian American is no longer useful, Shirley Geok-lin Lim uses this label to differentiate Asian Americans from white Americans, rather than in a pan-Asian sense when she writes that

> The non-European cast of Asian-American poetry, even from second and third generation Americans, is not surprising, since, unlike many white immigrants, Asians have not been as readily absorbed into American culture . . . . The Asian immigrants, even without their women and families, have resisted assimilation through their clan and tribal cohesiveness and their attachment to their first language.
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> . . . Asian-American poetry frequently expresses a counter-tradition [to European-based American literature] which is Confucianist rather than Freudian, in which the individual is seen as receiving value and dignity in relationship to some worthy others. (52, 56)

Historical Background of Chinese in the United States

The years 1848-1882 marked the initial phase of immigration to the United States, starting with the California Gold Rush and continuing with the large scale recruitment of Chinese laborers for railroad building. In less than forty years, the number of Chinese in the United States went from 4,000 to 107,000. Most were men, so that it has

been estimated that in 1880 Chinese men outnumbered Chinese women in the U.S. by a ratio of 27 to 1 (Kim 249). In 1882, the first of a series of Chinese Exclusion Acts were passed by the Congress of the United States that virtually halted immigration until 1943, when military alliances during World War II caused a change in policy. As a result, after peaking at 107,000 in 1890, the number of Chinese in the U.S. declined to 61,00 in 1920. Even in Hawaii, Chinese immigration was outlawed in 1898, partially out of fear that the Chinese would become the dominant ethnic group and outnumber white immigrants.

From 1943 to 1965 a limited number of Chinese were allowed to migrate and then, with the liberalization of immigration laws in 1965, the U.S. experienced a significant increase in immigration. At the same time, in the 1940s a small American-born generation came into maturity and a large influx of "war brides" corrected the historical gender imbalance (Sau-ling Wong 47). In 1960, then, there were about 240,000 people of Chinese heritage in the United States, but by 1990 there were 1,650,000, a 700-percent increase, with half of them recent immigrants (Kim fn 101, 319). In terms of their presence within the larger category of Asian Americans, there were twice as many Japanese Americans as Chinese Americans in 1960. But by 1990 the ratio had been reversed.

There exists, then, a relatively small number of third and fourth generation Chinese Americans alongside of a large number of recent Chinese immigrants, many of whom might consider themselves to be *Chinese in America* as distinct from being *Chinese American* in the sense of cultural hybridity. As Sau-ling Cynthia Wong notes,

> Because of American political rejection, no less than Chinese cultural imperatives, even those immigrants who had managed to put down roots on American soil tended to think of themselves as *huaqiao,* "overseas Chinese." It was only with the pan-Asian movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which highlighted the importance of recognizing Asians in America as an internally colonized ethnic

> minority that the term "Chinese Americans," like its superordinate "Asian Americans," began to take on its current meaning, connoting at once a claim to full membership in American society and intragroup coalition based on similarities in historical circumstances. (39-40)

One very important aspect of this cyclical pattern of migration is that there have always been recent immigrants who have helped to keep the Chinese language alive in the United States. Few third-generation Chinese Americans, however, are able to read Chinese (Sau-ling Wong 42). At the same time, classical stories, fables, and poems have been handed down orally from generation to generation. For example, Marilyn Chin has remarked that "my grandmother is illiterate, but she memorized Chinese poetry. And she memorized long poems, dating back to the Shih Ching" ("Interview" 70).

The formation of a Chinese American ethnic identity and sense of community has been complicated by the fact that the early immigrants from China came mainly from Guangdong Province. From 1965 to 1979, however, immigrants who considered themselves to be ethnically Chinese frequently came from Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, and similar countries rather than directly from Hong Kong or Taiwan. And after 1979 there has been a surge of immigrants from mainland China. As a result, many of these Chinese, such as the award winning poet Li-Young Lee and the poet and literary critic Shirley Geok-lin Lim, have already had experience with bi-culturality and multilingual communication before arriving in the United States.

Today there are approximately two million people in the United States of Chinese descent. These Chinese Americans comprise a population that is at once heterogeneous in terms of backgrounds, languages, religions, and the like, but also fairly homogenous in terms of cultural heritage, family values, experiences with discrimination, and a shared sense of the complexities of ethnic identity in the U.S. As a result of their relative homogeneity, it is possible to speak of such a thing as Chinese American literature. But due to their heterogeneity one finds, as Sau-ling Cynthia Wong asserts, that "the Chinese

American tradition, young to begin with, is ceaselessly being reconfigured" (41).

This ceaseless activity of innovation, experimentation, and reinvigoration is more evident today than it was in the 1960s and 1970s when so much of the Chinese American poetry was thematically informed by the Asian American movement. As George Uba argues, "the tradition of Asian American activist poetry—the dominant tradition of the 1960s and early 1970s—demanded that poetry be raw, rancorous, confrontational, and explicitly reformist in impulse . . . for people like Nellie Wong or Merle Woo . . . the poem had to reach a mass audience in a direct and forceful way; it had to incite reform and galvanize change" ("Versions" 103-4).

In part because the poetry of that day so directly addressed issues of heritage, identity, discrimination, immigrant alienation, family continuity, and language, Chinese American poets today may feel a greater sense of freedom in addressing whatever themes or topics appeal to their drive for poetic expression. This greater freedom of subject matter, however, complicates the definition of a Chinese American literature, which may be defied only by the ethnic origin of the author, by the thematic content of the literature, or by a combination of the two. But even with that we have the problem of poets of mixed heritage and their own sense of self-identification. For example, Eurasian author Diana Chang has remarked: "My problem is not that I feel inadequate as an American, but I often do feel inadequate as a Chinese" (Hamalian 30-31).

Almost all of the critical attention has been given to fiction rather than to poetry, even though Chinese American poets have won awards and are regularly taught in universities across the country. For example, Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong in an overview essay for a 1997 volume titled *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature* devotes only one page out of sixteen to poetry. She also notes that the first anthology devoted exclusively to Chinese American poets was not published until 1991 (52; see Wang and Zhao). One explanation is that poetry is simply not very popular in the United States. Another is that many critics and teachers experience daunting diffi-

culty when approaching poems that may mix quite freely allusions to Chinese history, geography, literary classics, Confucianist values, communist/anticommunist politics, and interspersed words from the Chinese language. The foregoing are then also often mixed with allusions to other literatures, cultures, and traditions as may result from an individual writer's erudition. And yet, is it not ironic that hundreds of critics in the United States have struggled to make sense of the so-called ideogrammatic method of Ezra Pound, and yet shy away from Chinese American poetry because of the alleged difficulty of its allusions?

Chinese American Poets

In this section I will consider the work of individual poets, which I will group along the lines of pan-Asian politics, immigrant authors, and Hawai'ian Islands Chinese Americans. I will then conclude with a consideration of a poet whose mixed ethnicity complicates the very categories that I am establishing here.

Pan-Asian Politics: Fay Chiang and Nellie Wong

The poetry of Fay Chiang, especially her 1979 volume *In the City of Contradictions,* exemplifies the kind of pan-Asian political orientation of Chinese-American poets that dominated the decades of the sixties and seventies. Appropriate to an identity politics, at the outset Chiang situates her self and her speaking voice in the title poem in which she defines not an *I,* but rather a "we": "we with our spirit, our love, our sinew/we are among the survivors // spread the news" (vi). The final line identifies her activist orientation, in which the title poem becomes a declaration of solidarity and a call to action. Having reached out to her readers, Chiang then tells them about her family, her self, and her affiliations in a section labeled "Chinatown."

In what one might term an act of filial piety, Chiang's first poem in this section is titled parents" (2-4). It tells their story of immigration: the father in 1939 as a "paper son," and the mother in 1950

"classified: *refugee from china,*" the two meeting in an arranged marriage. Almost stereotypically, she is portrayed as working in a sewing factory and he in a laundry, where the children are raised in a back room. Given its date of production, 1976, it is not surprising that Chiang concludes with an optimistic, visionary statement: "legacy:/the clarity of our own vision/what we choose to do with our lives/will bear fruit to that work/spirit."

The poem that follows "parents" is titled "Chinatown" (5-7) and moves out into a larger framework of affiliation and emphasizes the degree to which the parents' story of the previous poem needs to be understood as typical rather than exceptional or stereotypical (see Li on "filiation" and "affiliation"). This poem also takes a much harder political look at the conditions that have caused the poverty and pain of Chinatown life. But as with the parent's story, this poem does not stop at depicting hardships or at identifying the source of oppression, but provides a political response to such conditions:

> I struggled to learn to say and to believe:
> right on
> to people's struggle and all power to the people
>
> There is a people spirit and movement
> growing and pushing
> rearranging the order of things
> that nothing can hold back. (7)

The section "Chinatown" is followed by sections named "Family," "New York City," "Women," "Contradictions," "Survival," and "Rituals and Visions." In these Chiang develops a more pan-ethnic and explicitly working-class perspective. But the attention to pan-ethnic and class politics does not mean an effacing of her own Chinese heritage. In the "Survival" part she has a poem titled "Bitter Strength," for which she provides a gloss note explaining that "bitter strength" is *ku li,* the origin of the American word, "coolie" (61). And in the final part of the book, "Rituals and Visions," Chiang has a po-

em titled "Father" discussing her learning the calligraphy for her Chinese name, as well as poems about her mother and her boyfriend, who we learn at book's end is Japanese American.

Nellie Wong published her first collection of poetry in 1977, *Dreams in Harrison Railroad Park,* and continued to write with anger and political commitment in her second volume, *The Death of Long Steam Lady* published in 1984, the volume that I will discuss here. In part, the benefit of studying the second volume lies in seeing the ways in which the politics of the 1960s and 1970s might be kept alive in the very conservative 1980s. During the period of the writing of the poems for this volume, Wong published a prose piece titled "In Search of the Self As Hero." In this essay, Wong defines herself as "an Asian American feminist" (177). Yet, she also makes use of Chinese words and writes of "Chinese American culture" as well as "Asian American sensibility" (177). In searching for role models, Wong looks to Ding Ling of China, with whom she feels a greater affinity of experience than with other Asian American writers that she also names. As with Chiang, then, defining oneself as Asian American and promoting a pan-Asian or pan-ethnic political solidarity does not mean suppressing the particularities of Chinese and Chinese American experience, but rather insuring that they are represented as part of a larger experience of discrimination and resistance in the United States.

But perhaps also the differences between the Chiang poems written in the early to mid-1970s and the Wong poems written in the early 1980s reflect the gradual shift from solidarity politics to the more personal and ethnic differentiating social themes that we find after the Vietnam War era has ended. Ethnic identity in *Long Steam Lady* is everywhere Chinese American. And while the explicit politics of the volume address discrimination along racial and class lines, Wong emphasizes feminist issues more than Chiang. This feminism leads Wong also to criticize her Chinese heritage and aspects of its continuation in the United States rather than speaking only lovingly of it as Chiang seems to do.

As with Chiang's *In the City of Contradictions, Wong's Long Steam Lady* contains highly positive portraits of her mother and father.

But the more general poems about Chinese familial relationships are often negative in regard to women's roles. In like manner, the hardships of growing up female in Chinatown are addressed in several poems, where the speaker focuses on the endless hours of restaurant work in the family-owned business, as in "Reminiscing About a Chinese Restaurant," and of the limited expectations for the future lives of female children in "Of Necessity." At the same time, however, Chinatown provides a certain level of ethnic identification that helps in the struggle against racial discrimination and self-hatred.

The problem of pride in heritage versus self-hatred for being different begins with the ways, as Chiang had depicted, of children being bombarded with media images in the 1950s that were exclusively white. Wong writes in "Away from the Blue Swans" (17-18), for instance, of attending an uptown movie theater and experiencing "how George Montgomery on the life-size screen/sealed our exodus/with his sensuous lips." While the screen may be "life-sized" what it displays is anything but life-like for young girls from Chinatown. Wong's poem "When I Was Growing Up" (23-24) is written in direct address. This technique, popular in activist writing, stresses the author's claim on the reader to respond to the political statements being made in terms of accepting responsibility for recognizing and solving social problems. The first line reads "I know now that I once longed to be white," and makes the point that

> when I was growing up, I hungered
> for American food, American styles
> coded: *white* And even to me, a child
> born of Chinese parents, being Chinese
> was feeling foreign, was limiting,
> was unAmerican. (23)

The last stanza repeats the opening line, but clearly the emphasis is no longer on the word "white" but on the word "once." The poet, despite being culturally bombarded to engage in self-hatred, no longer has such desires, and by implication neither should anyone else nor

should the culture instill such psychic pain through discrimination on others.

When readers look at some of the other poets discussed in this essay, they will find them retelling their personal or family histories often to question their significance or relevance, or else to understand why history might still have such a hold on an individual. In activist poetry, however, history is retold primarily to educate the reader. Such is the case with Wong's "It's In The Blood" (41-43), which tells the convoluted history of her family's names and the fraudulent identification of various individuals. The poem states explicitly that "In 1924 the law said that Chinese men/could bring no wives to the United States." As a result, Wong's father uses forged papers to bring his wife and daughters from China as his sister and nieces. And when his wife became pregnant in the United States, they had to arrange to "marry" her to another man so that Nellie would not be born out of wedlock. As a result, she ends up with a different family name than her parents, who lead their public lives as brother and sister, even though they are husband and wife. As Wong relates in the poem, "I was never sure who I really was."

In the final poem of *The Death of Long Steam Lady*, Wong combines pride in Chinese heritage with struggle against racist discrimination and the feminist struggle against male chauvinism. "Under Our Own Wings" (65-67), dedicated to fellow activist poet Merle Woo, opens with the words "Do not despair" and argues for the need to combine rather than separate the struggles against racism and sexism. The poem ends calling on Woo and Wong herself to continue the battle without assimilation, without self-hatred, and without defeat.

Immigrant Poets

Fay Chiang and Nellie Wong are both native-born Chinese Americans whose parents were first-generation immigrants. Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Li-Young Lee, and Marilyn Chin are three poets who are themselves immigrants.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim was born and raised in Malacca, Malaysia.

Lim grew up under colonialism and has experienced multiple forms of discrimination. In 1980 her first book of poems won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize, while her third volume, *Modern Secrets,* was published by an Australian press. Despite reviews of this volume placing it within the "literature of Malaysia and Singapore," Lim is now a permanent resident of the United States.

While many of the poems place Lim in the geography of Malaysia, her cultural allusions identify her with China, as in the poem "Bukit China" (14). Performing a ritual at her father's grave, she remarks that "Country is important./Is important. This knowledge I know." But the repetition here has more to do with grief than with a political statement. The rest of the poem reveals that this daughter was far away when her father died, and her mourning comes after the fact of his burial. If "country is important," then why was the daughter not with the father at his death? Is country so much a place in this poem as a heritage, as a way of life, as a set of rites and obligations? And is there something about this particular state that may have driven her away? The poem does not answer these questions, but certainly raises them.

As with Nellie Wong there exists for Lim the possibility that part of what separates her from that important country is a sense of traditional discrimination against women, as suggested by the poem "Pantoun for Chinese Women," which begins with a 1983 quotation from "The People's Daily, Peking," about the ongoing Chinese problem of female infanticide. In "Pantoun" Lim adopts the persona of a grieving woman whose husband is going to let their infant daughter die because "They say a child with two mouths is no good." While perhaps more indirect than a poem by Wong or Chiang, Lim uses the epigraph from "The People's Daily" to inform the reader that this poem is not a description of one individual's suffering but of a cultural problem of an entire nation, a nation with which she identifies but also must criticize.

Modern Secrets bears out the remark King-Kok Cheung makes that Asian American Studies today emphasize the experience of *diaspora.* The concept of diaspora emphasizes the transnational cultural

connections among peoples who experience significant patterns of migration, such as the Chinese. Such an attention is evident in Lim's poems about issues of language, such as "Lament" (30) and "To Li Poh" (32). In the latter poem, Lim laments the decline of her ability to speak Chinese, and the cultural loss that it implies. Complaining about reading Li Po in translation, she writes:

> . . . Country man, you believed to be Chinese
> No more than a condition of human history.
> Yet I cannot speak your tongue with ease,
> No longer from China. Your stories
> Stir griefs of dispersion and find
> Me in simplicity of kin. (32)

In these lines one can see a struggle within the speaker over self-definition as well as over the idea of what it means to be "kin" even though "no longer from China." As Diana Chang has remarked, "being a Chinese-American woman is an elusive identity and a confusing one, even to myself" (Hamalian 29).

Part of that confusion arises from the multiplicity of cultural contexts in which a person such as Shirley Geok-lin Lim moves, so that she can at once identify with and feel separated from Li Po. She can write a poem titled "Song of an Old Malayan" (97), speaking in that persona about nationalism and the way it separates people on the one hand, and write a poem titled "Visiting Malacca" (101-02), with the line "I am losing/Ability to make myself at home" on the other hand. Lim represents the problem that both Marilyn Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston addressed when Chin interviewed Kingston. Chin, in commenting on the protagonist of *The Woman Warrior*, states that "she had to wade through the contradictions of this dual culture, this heavy-duty heritage" and Kingston replied: "When you are a person from a multi-cultural background it just means that you have more information coming in from the universe. And it's your task to figure out how it all integrates, figure out its order and its beauty" (Chin, "Interview' 63). The problem, however, as many of these poets con-

tend, is that the information from different cultures often does not integrate, but remains contradictory, creating a sense of mutual exclusions that they must learn to counter through multiple inclusions.

Li-Young Lee, like Lim, was not born in China. His parents left the mainland after 1949, and Lee was born while they were living in Jakarta, Indonesia, where his father practiced medicine. But his father ran afoul of the Sukarno regime and was jailed for being too western. After a year in prison the Lee family moved on to Hong Kong, Macau, and Japan before settling in the United States, where Lee's father became a Presbyterian minister in Pennsylvania. While Lee is bilingual, his formal education has been almost entirely in English. In 1986, Lee published his first volume of poetry, *Rose*, which received widespread critical acclaim and then in 1990 wont the Lamont Poetry Award for a second book of poems, *The City in Which I love You.*

Lee opens *The City* with the poem "Furious Versions" (13-15), in which the first section depicts images of fear and flight, including migration to the United States. This section also establishes Lee's thesis for the entire volume. "Memory revises me," he says, and goes on to define poetry as a revising of one's life. While the status of refugee and the significance in his life of his father's religion are made explicit in this first section, Lee's Chinese heritage is suggested only by subtle clues, such as the phrase "another thousand years," and a background philosophy of ancestor worship that enables the actions of the present to rewrite the status of events in the past. And these events, such as his father's political exile, must be rewritten because their interpretation defines the "here and now." Lee does not ask the American version of the question, "whom am I," with its implications of autonomy and self-fashioning. Nor do I think does he ask a Chinese version of that question.

Rather, his question is one repeatedly heard in Chinese American poetry, asked by people who know that they and their ancestors, both immediate and ancient, are inextricably knotted in the present moment. But they also know that the present moment and the present place of their existence introduce other variables in their psychological and historical fashioning beyond family, village, language, and

heritage. A part of those other variables is the American ideal of individualism and individual autonomy. So a curious contradiction is established in which the idea of "self-fashioning" is one that is as imposed upon Chinese American poets by their American context as filial piety is imposed by their Chinese lineage. As Lee notes, "The past/doesn't fall away, the past/joins the greater/telling, and is" (26).

And yet, the past does fall away to some extent, and is that not the dilemma of the immigrant? Citizenship does not confer a feeling for the past of a particular place. Only inhabitation can do that. But citizenship does involve a turning away from one historically informed future toward another. The immigrant is, then, both choosing and being chosen, constructing and being constructed each day that he or she is away from the ancestral home. For the refugee there may be the hope of homecoming, of returning. But at a certain point that dream becomes another memory. As Lee admits in "Arise, Go Down" (37-38), "I grow more fatherless each day." In response, he struggles diligently to improve the memory of his father's life, of his own participation in it, and the significance of his father's suffering within the history of the century. But at the same time, the rest of life is flooding in.

Aware of these contradictions and the probable impossibility of their resolution, Lee ends *The City* with a poem titled "Cleaving" (77-87) "Cleaving" in itself elicits a sense of contradiction because it means in English both binding together and splitting apart. In this final poem, Lee finds himself in Chinatown, identifying not only with Chinese immigrants but with other immigrants as well. "I daily face," Lee writes, "this immigrant,/this man with my own face," not because they all look Chinese, but because they all must experience "Change."

Marilyn Chin was born in Hong Kong but raised in Portland, Oregon. Despite that entirely American upbringing, she may be better versed in Chinese tradition, culture, and language than many other Chinese American poets as a result of her formal education. She majored in ancient Chinese Literature at the University of Massachusetts and worked as a translator for the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa. While there she cotranslated *The Selected*

Poems of Ai Qing, to whom she dedicated her first collection of poetry, *Dwarf Bamboo*. As Chin told Maxine Hong Kingston while interviewing her, "I always think back to the T'ang Dynasty when I write poetry. I feel that I am very much a part of that Chinese tradition. I don't want to be cut off from it. That's why I studied classical Chinese . . . . I feel close ties to my Chinese roots" ("Interview" 65). And as mentioned earlier, her grandmother's memorizing of Chinese poetry also connects Chin with the Chinese oral tradition perhaps as strongly as her education connects her with the written one. But a close scrutiny of the tone and style of Chin's two volumes of poetry to date, *Dwarf Bamboo* and *The Phoenix Gone, The Terrace Empty*, suggest that her proximity to classical Chinese literature would have to be said to be with the literati writers, who were often ironic, satirical, and bawdy, brandishing their erudition through feats of allusion. Chin's verse is highly sophisticated and her voicing quite complex.

As a result, one finds Chinese American critics producing contradictory readings of her poetry. Chin titles the first section of *Dwarf Bamboo* "The Parent Node," which David Lewei Li sees as "a filial image aimed at creating a sense of collective kinship" (178), an aim which he believes Chin realizes. As a result he reads the first poem, "The End of a Beginning," in a straightforward fashion: "Consciously pursuing the line of descent, the poem re-marks the presence of the rail, restores a historical foundation, and repairs the broken links between the past and present. It provides, as Chin genuinely believes, 'The Parent Node' for the group of her poems" (178). But George Uba argues that "the post-activist poem tends to recognize problematics of language and event both as a way of approaching identity and of renouncing its stability" ("Versions" 35). He, therefore, does not accept the kind of interpretation that Li provides. Rather, in reading two other poems in this section, "The Landlord's Wife" and "Untrimmed Mourning," Uba claims that "the 'Chinese' identity of these two survivors is self-consciously multiple, deriving from no acknowledged center but negotiated among historical contingencies" (36). In Li's version, Chin believes in the possibility of achieving a sense of cultural kinship and stable identity through paying homage to her an-

cestors and through invoking images of Chinese culture. But Uba argues that while poets of Chin's generation may desire such stability and explore historical affiliation and kinship, they are much less sanguine and politically committed to its achievement.

While Li overestimates the degree to which Chin believes in the possibility of repairing "broken links" to the past resulting in his overlooking Chin's irony and satire, Uba's position of postmodern skepticism causes him to fail to distinguish between general skepticism and feminist critique of tradition. For example, with Chin's poem, "A Chinaman's Chance" Uba reads it as skeptical and satirical, which is appropriate. He then remarks that "the repudiation of traditional beliefs further problematizes the effort to recover a 'lost' identity" ("Versions"38). But Uba neglects to attend to the gender inflected repudiation here. For Chin, as with other Chinese American women poets, tradition and gender are often in conflict.

So, while the poems in *Dwarf Bamboo* demonstrate an ability to recover far more of Chinese culture and family history than would be the case for some Chinese Americans, whose ancestry is lost in forged papers, forgotten dialects, and even religious beliefs, the poems of the "American Soil" section raise questions about the position of Chinese women in Chinese culture, in Chinese American culture, and in the United States in general. Chin recognizes that the position of immigrant, which leads to the position of cultural hybrid, enables a certain degree of selection. Knowledge of tradition does not require that the second or third generation Chinese American accept all of that tradition or value it equally.

Chin also demonstrates that a Chinese American need not accept the culture of contemporary China uncritically either. The satire of "After My Last Paycheck From the Factory, Two Thin Coupons, Four Tin Dollars, I Invited Old Liu for an Afternoon Meal," with the epigraph *"for the Cultural Revolution and all that was wrong with my life,"* deflates the excessively romantic and idealized images of China frequently flaunted by American youth before the death of Mao. Uba claims that "at the end of the poem, the [speaker] is given no firm hold on her own identity" ("Versions" 37). But the entire point of the

poem seems to be that identity can never be "given" to a person, either completely or once and for all; rather, it is developed, multiple, and changing.

Chin recognizes this reality of developmental, multiplicitous identity, as indicated by the "Prelude" to *The Phoenix Gone, The Terrace Empty* in which she writes:

> To love your country
> is to know its beginnings
> not with the bald-face moon
> or the complacent river—
> but here within you (5)

And within Chin, despite her satire and irony, despite her self-mockery in various poems, such as "How I Got That Name" and "The Barbarians Are Coming," the last section of this volume is titled "Beijing Spring, *for the Chinese Democratic Movement.*" In the first poem of "Beijing Spring," Chin writes: "Yet, my caged canary/yearns to sing in the forest./The fattened koi in my pond/dreams of the ocean" (85).

As with the other two immigrant poets treated here, Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Li Young Lee, becoming Chinese American means an ongoing process of letting go and hanging on, of remembering and willfully forgetting, of accepting and of rejecting, and of being accepted and being rejected. Chin's poetry, more so than any of the other poets mentioned here, abounds with allusions to Chinese history, literature, and geography; it also abounds with very American images as they reflect upon and impact a Chinese American. "While a critic like David Hsin-Fu Wand was very concerned in his pioneering critical work to speak of poets who were "highly Chinese in their sensibility" even though writing in English (141), these immigrant poets raise serious doubts about some category of essential, unchanging sensibility. Chin, who knows the classical Chinese literary tradition well, both demonstrates that "sensibility" is not an essence easily defined nor a guide to authenticity when defining Chinese American

poetry.

Hawai'ian Islands and Mixed Heritage Chinese Americans

This section will treat the work of two male poets who have grown up in Hawai'i, Eric Chock and Wing Tek Lum, and one female poet, Cathy Song, who is also of nixed Asian heritage. It is important to consider how those particularities might complicate conceptions of Chinese American identity and poetry. Stephen Sumida in "Sense of Place, History, and the Concept of the 'Local' in Hawai'i's Asian/Pacific Literatures," makes the point that Hawai'i is the only region of the United States "where there is no majority ethnic group" (215). Further, Sumida points out that regardless of the ethnic background of the author:

> Deeply undercurrent in Hawaii's Asian/Pacific American literatures are influences of local history and place, both of these concepts particularized in such an assertive way that these literatures inherently exercise resistance against presumed national, even mainland Asian American generalities . . . in Hawaii's island culture *place* is conceived *as history—that* is, as the story enacted on any given site. (216)

As a result, then, of these particular circumstances one finds an intermixing of cultural allusions in poetry by Chinese Americans which at times makes it difficult to distinguish such poetry from that by other Hawai'ian poets. And yet, unlike, say, some of the poems of other American poets of Chinese descent, this relative indistinguishability does not result from assimilation into dominant American culture. Rather, it results from a multicultural melding of shared experience in the process of becoming island inhabitants on the part of oppressed immigrants forced into close quarters and similar circumstances whose experiences remain nonidentical.

Of the poets considered here, Eric Chock is the one who ex-

presses the fewest allusions to Chinese ancestry and most heavily represents himself as being shaped by place. In this sense, he might be more profitably defined as a Hawai'ian poet, not in terms of native ethnicity but in terms of regional identification. For example, in *Last Days Here,* he has a poem titled "Danny Boy" (12-13), which begins: "To me it was a Hawai'ian song/as every night your Chinese tenor rose/and filled my two sisters and me/with summer in the meadow." While clearly the setting is established as Hawai'i and the family as Chinese American, it is only the final word of these lines that reveals the cultural hybridity humor of this poem. "Meadow" clarifies that "Danny Boy" names the Irish lullaby the mother sings her children each night, the experience mixing cultures in both the practice itself and the specific song chosen. There is nothing culturally Chinese here.

Even Chock's poem about visiting his father's grave at the Manoa cemetery where Hawai'ian Chinese are buried makes the experience a specifically Hawai'ian one at least in the speaker's mind. But then, as Chock describes the very Chinese rituals he performs and wonders about being four generations removed from China, what Wand describes as a "Chinese sensibility" may perhaps be distinguished by the reader. Chock expresses a deep sense of unworthiness in his meditation about the value of ancestor worship when he remarks: "And if you/who put your earthly life/in taro and sugarcane/deserve a burial and worship n this hill,/I should have my ashes scattered/from an airplane" (60). This sentiment seems typically Chinese to me. But what remains unclear to me is whether the sentiment is a Chinese one that has become integrated into contemporary Hawai'ian culture and so may be felt by all inhabitants of the islands, or if it is a Chinese one that has influenced other Asian cultures, and so become typically Asian American, whether the person is of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, or even Filipino ancestry, and widely in evidence in Hawai'i? In other words, a sensibility may be not exclusive to a single ethnic group and so may be a source of pan-ethnic solidarity at the same time that it is a part of a specific ethnic heritage.

Wing Tek Lum's *Expounding the Doubtful Points* combines

strong attention to his Chinese cultural heritage, particularly through literary allusions and epigraphs referring to T'ao Ch'ien and Li Po. He also, like so many other Chinese American poets, devotes many poems to family history, his parental family, and his own marriage family. And yet, we also see the location-as-history Hawai'ian sentiment that Sumida talks about appearing in numerous poems.

Unlike Chock, Lum may represent the way in which ethnic heritage can reassert itself even in a multiethnic, pan-Asian cultural milieu. Lum, it turns out, as an adult visited his ancestral village in China and also went to Hong Kong to learn the Chinese language. While there he married a Hong Kong woman and brought her back to Hawai'i. As a result, his sense of ethnic identity as a Chinese American is going to be formed through a combination of historical and contemporary influence from the Hawai'ian ethnic Chinese community, his visit to the mainland, and his wife's contemporary Hong Kong sensibility. These may often be somewhat at odds, however, rather than complementary. In the poem "Taking Her to the Open Market" (80-81), Lum realizes that his definition of fresh fish is quite different from hers: "'We have,'/I muttered, 'killed off/more than germs." Certainly he is not referring here to killing fish, but rather to losing something precious in cultural practice.

These two Hawai'ian Chinese American poets and Cathy Song are the only Chinese American poets I have read who seem to feel really at home. This feeling does not seem to result from their generational situation, which is different in each case, but rather from the pan-Asian character of Hawai'ian society. If such a feeling is truly the case, then it would argue for the need to continue an emphasis on pan-Asian solidarity and unity in the United States even while exploring cultural differences, so that the possibility of multicultural cosmopolitanism may create the space and the context for a genuinely multiethnic American landscape.

Cathy Song represents part of that multiethnic landscape, and like many other Asian American poets, including ones of Chinese descent, she complicates the concept of Chinese American as a result of being of mixed Asian heritage. Her father was Korean American

and her mother Chinese American, both of Hawai'i, and she has further complicated that heritage for her children by marrying a white American. Her poetry reflects frequently on her Korean relatives, but in terms of cultural heritage the emphasis is clearly on the Chinese side of the family. At the same time, her first volume, *Picture Bride,* is heavily influenced by the artistic aesthetics of the American painter Georgia O'Keefe and the Japanese *ukiyo-e* (woodblock print) artist Utamaro.

In *Picture Bride* and in her second volume, *Frameless Windows, Squares of Light,* the Chinese cultural allusions vary in frequency. But these poems are also the ones written mainly when she was living away from Hawai'i. Many of the poems in her third book, however, *School Figures,* are set in Hawai'i, back among her relatives, and she herself has become the mother of two children. The kinship of extended family begins to take on increasing importance as she relates to her mother and her grandmothers from the vantage point not so much of being a daughter as of being another mother. And so, there is a way then that the notion of filial piety may gradually give way to a sense of familial identification that is mother to mother rather than daughter to mother. Song also begins to see her parents' relationship and her grandparents' relationships through the eyes of a wife rather than a daughter or granddaughter, and this too causes a change in perspective. This changed perspective is one found frequently in American women's poetry regardless of ethnicity, and so it may be the case that in Song's poems one finds a cultural blending of hierarchy and heterarchy, rather than the maintenance of an unchanging philosophy.

In "Heaven" *(Frameless* 77), Song writes of her son:

> He thinks when we die we'll got to China
> Think of it—A Chinese heaven
> where, except for his blond hair,
> the part that belongs to his father,
> everyone will look like him
> It must be in the blood,
> this notion of returning

Such an inclusivist inspiration leads Song to recover, back home in Hawai'i, as much of the multiplicitous cultural heritage that she can muster, as a Chinese, as a Korean, as a Hawai'ian, and as an American.

In *School Figures,* then, she can write in "Square Mile" (100-01) of her son sitting in the same classroom where she sat as a child, while she is driving the same road that her father drove when he courted her mother: "The turns I take he anticipated." The same classroom and the same road, but now it is a son instead of a daughter, a married woman driving home instead of an unmarried man going courting. It is the same, yet not the same, so that the father and mother's lives lay the groundwork for Song's life, which is the same in some ways and in other ways vastly different. Yet they are linked by love, caring, and an anticipation of the future.

Conclusion

For many of these Chinese American poets, then, there is the maintenance of relationship, a sense of tradition in which each apparent repetition carries within it innovation. We may then speak of a living heritage, and a cultural continuity through growth and reinvigoration. Particularly for the Hawai'ian poets, such growth comes through learning to dwell deeply in a particular place. But whether or not that place is Honolulu or San Francisco or New York City, their poetry speaks of a hope—even when at times there does not seem to be a faith—in the possibility of cultural inclusiveness based on combining multigenerational and multiethnic experience. I do not know if that represents a Chinese sensibility, but it certainly represents a Chinese American one.

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