TRANSCULTURAL HERSTORIES: EXPLORING MEMORY, LANGUAGE, AND SPACE IN SELECT CHINESE AMERICAN WOMEN'S NARRATIVES

Thesis submitted to the University of Calicut for the award of the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH

by

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DECLARATION

I, **Harsha A U S**, hereby declare that the thesis entitled, **Transcultural Herstories: Exploring Memory, Language, and Space in Select Chinese American Women's Narratives**, submitted to the University of Calicut for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English, is an original record of observations and bona fide research carried out by me, under the guidance of **Dr Aysha Swapna K A**, Principal and Professor of English, Farook College (Autonomous), Kozhikode, and that it has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree or diploma or similar titles. The contents of the thesis have undergone plagiarism check using iThenticate software at CHMK Library, University of Calicut, and the similarity index found within the permissible limit. I also declare that the thesis is free from AI-generated content.

Place: Kozhikode

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Date: 9 February 2026

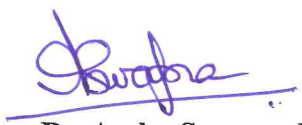
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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled, **Transcultural Herstories: Exploring Memory, Language, and Space in Select Chinese American Women's Narratives**, submitted by Ms. **Harsha A U S** to the University of Calicut for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English, is an original record of observations and bona fide research, carried out by her under my supervision, and that it has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree or diploma or similar titles.



Dr. Aysha Swapna K A

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Place: Kozhikode

Date: 9 February 2026

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines select personal and fictional narratives by select Chinese American women writers, namely, Jade Snow Wong, Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, Lisa See, Yiyun Li, and Jean Kwok, to understand how they actively negotiate and embrace their transcultural subjectivities within the contact zones of memory, language, and space, thereby constructing multi-faceted herstories of migration, adaptation, and integration into American sociocultural spheres. It uses the idea of "herstories" to advance gendered, racialised, and historically positioned perspectives that resist dominant cultural narratives, asserting that the select texts are not merely accounts of migration but complex narratives shaped by the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, and class. The introduction situates Chinese American women's writing as a subset of the wider discipline of Asian American literature and posits the central question: how do these writers negotiate multiple subject positions within the transcultural contexts of American sociocultural life? Drawing on theoretical concepts such as transculturation, contact zones, intersectionality, and Asian American feminist criticism, the study seeks to move beyond assimilationist or binary models of identity. Chapter One focuses on the personal narratives of Wong, Kingston, and Tan, showcasing how memory operates as a metaphorical space where personal trauma, cultural memory, and generational tensions are negotiated through experimental narrative forms. Chapter Two examines how language functions as a site of identity-making in the writings of Kingston, Tan, Li, and Kwok, engaging with issues such as bilingualism, language anxiety, linguistic hybridity, and linguistic exile. Chapter Three considers physical spaces in select

novels by See and Kwok, including homes, Chinatowns, schools, and dance studios, as contact zones that both constrain and facilitate the formation of transcultural identity. These spaces reflect the pressures of racial and gendered hierarchies but also stimulate possibilities for performance, upliftment, and emotional connection. The thesis concludes that these narratives construct transcultural subjectivities not through fixed categories but through ongoing processes of adaptation, contradiction, and negotiation.

സംഗ്രഹം

ഓർമ, ഭാഷ, ഇടം എന്നീ സമ്പർക്കമേഖലകളിലൂടെ എങ്ങനെ ചൈനീസ് അമേരിക്കൻ സ്ത്രീ എഴുത്തുകാർ, ട്രാൻസ്കൾച്ചറൽ കർതൃത്വങ്ങളെ സമന്വയിപ്പിക്കുന്നു എന്ന് ഈ പ്രബന്ധം പരിശോധിക്കുന്നു. ജെയ്ഡ് സ്നോ വോങ്, മാക്സിൻ ഹോങ് കിങ്സ്റ്റൺ, ഏമി ടാൻ, ലിസ സീ, ജീൻ കോക്, യിയുൻ ലി എന്നിവരുടെ ആത്മകഥാപരവും സാങ്കല്പികവുമായ കൃതികൾ പഠനവിധേയമാക്കി, നിലവിലുള്ള വരേണ്യ സാസ്കാരികാഖ്യാനങ്ങളെ ചെറുത്ത് നിൽക്കുന്ന ലിംഗപര-വംശീയാധിഷ്ഠ-ചരിത്രപര നിലപാടുകളെ 'പെൺചരിത്രാഖ്യാനങ്ങൾ' എന്ന ആശയത്തോട് കൂട്ടിച്ചേർത്താണ് ഈ പ്രബന്ധം പഠനം നടത്തുന്നത്. ഈ കൃതികൾ ഒന്നും തന്നെ കേവലം കുടിയേറ്റവിവരണങ്ങളല്ല, മറിച്ച് ലിംഗഭേദം, വംശീയത, വംശം, വർഗ്ഗം തുടങ്ങിയവയുടെ ഉൾപ്പിണരലുകളിലൂടെ രൂപംകൊണ്ട സങ്കീർണ്ണ കഥാഖ്യാനങ്ങളാണ്. ചൈനീസ് അമേരിക്കൻ പെണ്ണെഴുത്തിനെ ഏഷ്യൻ അമേരിക്കൻ സാഹിത്യത്തിന്റെ വിശാലമണ്ഡലത്തിൽ പ്രതിഷ്ഠിച്ച് അമേരിക്കൻ സാമൂഹിക-സാംസ്കാരിക ജീവിതാന്തരീക്ഷത്തിൽ ഈ എഴുത്തുകാർ എങ്ങനെ ബഹുവിധ കർതൃത്വസ്ഥാനങ്ങൾ വഹിക്കുന്നു എന്ന കേന്ദ്രചോദ്യമാണ് അവതാരികയിൽ ഉൾക്കൊള്ളിച്ചിരിക്കുന്നത്. ട്രാൻസ്കൾച്ചറേഷൻ, സമ്പർക്കമേഖലകൾ, ഇന്റർസെക്ഷണാലിറ്റി, ഏഷ്യൻ അമേരിക്കൻ ഫെമിനിസ്റ്റ് പഠനങ്ങൾ തുടങ്ങിയ സൈദ്ധാന്തിക ആശയങ്ങളെ മുൻനിർത്തി സ്വാംശീകൃതവും ദ്വന്ദപരവുമായ സത്തകളെ ഈ പഠനം പരിശോധിക്കുന്നു. ഒന്നാം അധ്യായത്തിൽ വോങ്, കിങ്സ്റ്റൺ, ടാൻ എന്നിവരുടെ സ്വതന്ത്ര 'വ്യക്തികഥാഖ്യാനങ്ങളെ' മുൻനിർത്തി പരീക്ഷണാത്മകമായ ആഖ്യാനശൈലികളിലൂടെ വ്യക്തി ആഘാതങ്ങൾ, സാംസ്കാരിക സ്മരണകൾ, തലമുറകൾ തമ്മിലുള്ള സംവേദനസമ്മർദ്ദങ്ങൾ എന്നിവ വിശകലനം ചെയ്യുകയും, ഓർമ എങ്ങനെ ഇവയെയെല്ലാം പ്രവർത്തിപ്പിക്കുന്ന ഒരു ഇടമായി വർത്തിക്കുന്നുവെന്നും പരിശോധിക്കുന്നു. കിങ്സ്റ്റൺ, ടാൻ, ലി, കോക് എന്നിവരുടെ രചനകളിലുള്ള

ദ്വിഭാഷീയത, ഭാഷാപരമായ ഉത്കണ്ഠകൾ, ഭാഷാസങ്കരത്വം, ഭാഷാപ്രവാസം എന്നീ പ്രശ്നങ്ങളെ പഠനവിധേയമാക്കുകയും ഭാഷ ഈ കൃതികളിൽ എങ്ങനെ സ്വത്വനിർമിതിയുടെഒരു വേദിയായി പ്രവർത്തിക്കുന്നു എന്ന് പരിശോധിക്കുകയുമാണ് രണ്ടാമത്തെ അധ്യായത്തിൽ ചെയ്യുന്നത്. മൂന്നാം അധ്യായത്തിൽ സീ, കോക് എന്നിവരുടെ നോവലുകളിലുള്ള വീടുകൾ, ചൈനാടൗണുകൾ, സ്കൂളുകൾ, നൃത്തപ്രദർശനശാലകൾ എന്നിവ ഉൾപ്പെടുന്ന ഭൗതിക ഇടങ്ങളെ, ട്രാൻസ്കൾച്ചറൽ സ്വത്വരൂപീകരണ സാധ്യതകളെ ഒരേസമയം പരിമിതപ്പെടുത്തുകയും പ്രാപ്തമാക്കുകയും ചെയ്യുന്ന സമ്പർക്കമേഖലകളായി വീക്ഷിക്കുന്നു. ഈ ഇടങ്ങൾ വംശീയവും ലിംഗപരവുമായ ഉച്ചനീചത്വങ്ങൾ ഉണ്ടാക്കുന്ന പിരിമുറുക്കങ്ങളെ പ്രതിഫലിപ്പിക്കുക മാത്രമല്ല, അവതരണം, ഉന്നമനം, വൈകാരികാത്മബന്ധങ്ങൾ, എന്നിവയ്ക്കുള്ള സാധ്യതകളെ തുറന്നിടുക കൂടി ചെയ്യുന്നു. നിശ്ചിതമായ ചില രൂപമാതൃകകളിലൂടെയല്ല, മറിച്ച് അനുരൂപീകരണം, വൈരുദ്ധ്യം, ക്രയവിക്രയം, തുടങ്ങിയ പ്രക്രിയകളുടെ നിരന്തരമായ ഇടപെടലുകളിലൂടെയാണ് മേൽപറഞ്ഞ എഴുത്തുകാരുടെ ആഖ്യാനങ്ങൾ ട്രാൻസ്കൾച്ചറൽ കർതൃത്വങ്ങളെ രൂപകൽപ്പന ചെയ്യുന്നതെന്ന് പ്രബന്ധം ഉപസംഹരിക്കുന്നു.

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Introduction

The Asian American community, being one of the largest diasporic communities in the United States, boasts of a rich and diverse literary tradition; in which Chinese American literature holds a prominent position. While it was marginalised until a few decades ago, the emergence of a multitude of new authors has increased its visibility and transformed it into one of the most prolific fields in the American literary scene. Evolving from the immigrant testimonies of the late 19th and early 20th centuries to contemporary fiction dealing with complex themes and multiple genres, it reflects on the diversity and multiplicity of immigrant experiences across generations. Chinese American women writers have contributed immensely to the growth of this literary tradition, with their works reflecting the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, and class in shaping their experiences and subjectivities. Considering their rising prominence, this study seeks to contribute to the field of Asian American literature. It will contribute to women's writing by focusing on select transcultural women's narratives within the rubric of Chinese American literature. The thesis argues that the select personal and fictional narratives by Chinese American women writers actively negotiate and embrace their transcultural subjectivities within the contact zones of memory, language, and space, thereby constructing multi-faceted herstories of migration, adaptation, and integration into American sociocultural spheres. To comprehensively expound this statement, this thesis aims to investigate how the select Chinese American women

writers negotiate transcultural subjectivities in their personal and fictional narratives. The study explores the complex interplay of memory, myth, and history in shaping multifaceted herstories of migration, adaptation, and integration into American sociocultural spheres. Further, the thesis also examines the role of memory, language, and space as contact zones where these transcultural and gendered subjectivities are negotiated. Finally, it attempts to trace the evolution of transcultural storytelling in these narratives by analysing how their engagement with issues of identity and belonging transforms over time. The study closely reads select autobiographical and fictional writings of prominent Chinese American women writers, namely *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1950) by Jade Snow Wong, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts (1976)* by Maxine Hong Kingston, "Mother Tongue" (1990) and *Where the Past Begins* (2017) by Amy Tan, *Shanghai Girls* (2009) and *China Dolls* (2014) by Lisa See, *Girl in Translation* (2010) and *Mambo in Chinatown* (2014) by Jean Kwok, "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers" (2005), and *Dear Friend, From My Life I Write to You in Your Life* (2017) by Yiyun Li. This diverse selection of seminal as well as contemporary authors ensures a comprehensive look at how the representations of Chinese American women's lives and experiences have been shaped through different historical periods and contemporary realities. Further, it will also help in understanding the continuity of themes explored in these herstories and reveal how the expressions of their resilience, agency, and subjectivity transform over the years.

The term 'transcultural herstories' used in the title of this thesis foregrounds the lived experiences and narratives of women as they navigate their identities

across intersections of culture, gender, ethnicity, memory, language, and space. The term ‘herstory’ is a play on the word ‘history,’ substituting the pseudomorpheme ‘his’ with the singular third-person feminine pronoun to refer to “history viewed from a female or feminine perspective” (‘Herstory’). The word was first documented in use in 1932 by F. H. K. Green; it was popularised in the 1970s by U.S.-based militant feminists who used it to challenge traditionally male-focused historical narratives (*Herstory OED*). The term emphasises the need to counterbalance the historical prominence of male-centric narratives and promotes a gender-inclusive understanding of history by highlighting women's contributions and experiences. The present study extends the meaning of the term to an active transcultural process by which these Chinese American women reclaim their narrative authority by addressing patriarchal silencing and racial erasures of their voices. More than just documenting past experiences, ‘herstorying’ here becomes a form of transculturation, whereby identities are continuously reshaped and redefined through the contact zones of memory, language, and space, using techniques like genre-blending, mnemonic recollections, linguistic strategies, and spatial negotiations. ‘Herstorying’ thus functions as a form of resistance to the dominant narratives that stereotype, homogenise, and invisibilise them. The term ‘transcultural’ reflects on the fluidity and dynamicity of identity formation observed in the select Chinese American narratives. Using a transcultural lens facilitates an emphasis on the continuous negotiation of multiple cultural affiliations rather than the focus on assimilation and cultural conflict found in traditional diasporic considerations. The themes of memory, language, and space form the sites where the intersections of gender, race, and ethnicity inform transcultural subjectivities. Especially in the

contemporary era of globalisation, this approach is quite relevant, considering the constant redefinition of individual identities through the influence of lived experience, historical consciousness, and global cultures.

To thoroughly understand the context and significance of exploring the transcultural Chinese American women's narratives considered here, it is important to trace a brief history of the Chinese American community, with a special focus on its women. In 1834, a young, nineteen-year-old Chinese woman named Afong Moy had landed in New York Harbour, brought by the American trader brothers Nathaniel and Frederick Carne, to help sell their Chinese goods. Not long after her arrival, the Carnes set her up as the central attraction of their "recreated 'Chinese-saloon'." Moy, widely known as the "first recorded Chinese woman" to set foot in the United States, therefore was not an immigrant in search of a new life but rather a Chinese curiosity exhibited to attract and entertain the white New York society. Spectators flocked to watch her performances of Chineseness as she, clad in ornate traditional costumes, spoke in Chinese, used chopsticks, and walked "around the room to display her bound feet." She was later toured across the nation and displayed at museums and other places until the early 1850s, when she was "cast aside" for another younger Chinese woman and disappeared from the public eye without a trace afterwards (E. Lee, *The Making of Asian America* 31–32; H. Ling 1). For the American viewers who paid to see her, she was not an individual like themselves but a dehumanised commodity that validated their orientalist perception of Chinese people as exotic and Chinese culture as "inferior to American culture" ('Life Story'). Afong Moy is only the first one among thousands of Chinese American women who

have been historically erased and silenced throughout the almost two hundred years of the existence of people of Chinese ethnicity in the United States. Her story reveals the complicated and often troubled relationship shared by Chinese American women and the dominant American society—one fraught with fascination, fetishism, misconceptions, and stereotyping. The orientalist treatment of Foy as an exotic spectacle, devoid of any individual agency, illustrates the importance of accentuating the silenced voices and narratives of women from the margins of history. When Moy arrived in the mid-1830s, she would have been one of the very few individuals of Chinese ancestry present on US soil. Large-scale migration of Chinese people into the United States began only in 1849, after the discovery of gold in northern California, which created an influx of fortune seekers from around the world in what was known as the 'Gold Rush'. Lured by the promise of gold, thousands of Chinese men, mostly from the Cantonese-speaking villages of the Guangdong province in southeast China, moved to "*Gum Saan,* or Gold Mountain, as the Chinese called the United States" (E. Lee 60). Most of these were married men and their sons who left their homeland to secure their families' futures; their wives and daughters were largely left behind in their Chinese villages. These men were mostly "sojourners" who sought to return home as rich "Gold Mountain men" after years of hard work on foreign soil (67). Even after the promise of gold fizzled out, more Chinese men followed, working as labourers in the construction of the Trans-Pacific Railroad between 1865 and 1869. Soon, they also moved to other jobs, such as in "factories, canneries, fisheries, and fields" (71).

The deeply patriarchal system of 19th-century China, which bound women strictly to their homes, along with the difficult living conditions in America, prevented them from immigrating with their fathers and husbands. Of the small percentage of women who did get to the United States, most worked as prostitutes (Chou 16). In addition, the discriminatory U.S. immigration laws, including the 1875 Page Act, which "ostensibly forbade the importation of Asian women for illicit purposes (i.e., prostitution), but was universally applied to all female applicants for immigration," and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which specifically "restricted Chinese immigration," posed even greater impediments for their arrival (J. Lee and Nadeau 6, 237).These factors resulted in greatly skewed gender ratios among the Chinese people in America throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. It is reported that women made up only 5 percent of the Chinese people living in the United States in 1900, a decrease from the 7.2 percent in 1870 (E. Lee 68; Chou 16). As a result, there were hardly any families among the Chinese American community until the middle of the twentieth century, when the Exclusion Act was repealed. The War Brides Act, passed after the Second World War, also later helped in "creating more gender parity" (Chou 19).

Peffer observes that the Page Act and the Exclusion Act were specifically designed to reduce the number of Chinese people entering the United States, aiming to "stop the flow of the 'yellow peril' to American shores" (29). While the Exclusion Act was aimed at keeping all Chinese people out of the country, the Page Act explicitly targeted Chinese women, considering them as corrupt and immoral, and a danger to the Christian American family values. Motivated by racism and

xenophobia, these laws had a devastating impact on Chinese Americans, as they resulted in broken and separated families between China and America. Thus, Chinese America, during its days of inception, was largely a collection of bachelor societies.

According to Nguyen, these immigration legislations had been "explicitly a biopolitics of bodily regulation, shaping the Asian American community through acts targeting gender, sexuality, race, and class" ("Remasculinization" 133). They also observe on the deeply ingrained prejudices and stereotypes that prevailed in the dominant white public imagination about Asian people. Stereotypes are slightly rigid and "oversimplified generalization[s]" regarding a community or group of people, emphasising traits that may be positive or negative, but usually focusing on the latter (Colman 726). As "specialized schemas" used by people for understanding "others," they can often be inaccurate and deeply rooted in power hierarchies and cultural imaginaries, and hence may lead to prejudices and discrimination against the stereotyped group (Sibley and Osborne). They are major mechanisms of colonial discourse that simultaneously deprecate and fetishise the colonised subject (Bhabha 95–120). Within the diaspora context, stereotypes may be understood as the dominant culture's idealised images that are perpetuated to exclude and marginalise the minority culture. For Chinese Americans, stereotypes ranging from the 19th-century "yellow peril" to the contemporary "model minority" myth have historically been used as weapons by the dominant American society to racially otherise and invisibilise them. The "yellow peril" in the United States refers to the "fear of Asian immigration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries," arising out of the perception

of Asians as “inassimilable foreigners” and a “great threat” to the American identity as the “country of the White race and Western civilization” (Kawai 112). This perception was based on the traditional imperialist assumption that the white race was physically, morally and intellectually superior to the others, including Blacks, Native Americans, and Asians. The “yellow peril” discourse was actively propagated by articles and cartoons in popular American newspapers and magazines of the time, including *Puck, Harper's Weekly,* and *The Wasp.* These media images blatantly dehumanised Chinese people, portraying them as opium peddlers, gamblers, untrustworthy, and animal-like. This alarmist media discourse and deteriorating dominant perception about Asians eventually served as a rationale for the US government to systemically induce “measures to stop Chinese migration,” including the Page Act and Exclusion Act discussed earlier. Many subsequent legislations were brought out between 1884 and 1904 to limit Chinese migration further (Ono et al. 25–29).

The exclusionary immigration laws that specifically targeted Chinese immigrants played a double-edged role in that they not only emerged out of the prevalent stereotypes about them but also propagated and reinforced these stereotypes to an even greater extent. This was particularly true in the case of Chinese American women, who were largely viewed by the traditional moralistic American society as licentious and immoral. These stereotypical images of Chinese women in American public imaginations may be traced back to the mid- to late-nineteenth century, when they began arriving in the United States. They were also partly inspired by the Orientalist discourses that dominated Western views of the

East. Uchida traces the historical origins of the “Oriental Woman” stereotype to the anti-Chinese period from the 1870s to the 1900s, when Chinese women in America were largely categorised as prostitutes, owing to the large-scale “exploitation of young Chinese women by both Chinese and white men” in Chinatowns during the period. This stereotype led to Chinese and, in projection, other Asian women being regarded as impure, sexually corrupt, and accused of spreading diseases among young white men (163–65). These views were further exacerbated by the Page Act, which, as a result of the “[c]ultural anxieties and social paranoia that underscored negative Chinese stereotypes”, perpetuated the views branding Chinese women as prostitutes and therefore a moral threat to American society. Chinese culture, in general, was thought to be harmful to American culture (Wadhia and Hu 341–44).

Paradoxically, another racial stereotype that influenced the perception of Chinese women in American society was the contradictory image of a docile, submissive, and obedient domestic woman. This stereotype was inspired not only by the Western culture’s Orientalist views of the East but also by the twentieth-century wartime phenomenon of military brides that arose due to the historic presence of the US military in Asian countries during the world wars, the occupation of the Philippines, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. During this period, many Asian women were subjected to sexual exploitation by American military men, and many of the underprivileged women from these countries ended up marrying American servicemen as war brides. After the passing of the War Brides Act in 1946, many of these wives were brought to America and projected as “perfect wives” who possessed all the domestic and feminine virtues that pleased the average white

American man (Uchida 166–7). These Asian war brides also served to boost the collective ego of white American society by projecting themselves as emancipators of the poor Asian women who were oppressed by the patriarchal values of their parent societies:

> Relationships between Asian American women and white men were often depicted, through images of military brides either as submissive wives or as foreign prostitutes, in either case rescued by America's paternal discretion and international power. The subordination of military brides in the colonial/postcolonial gender order translated into national racial politics, in which white men emphasised the overfeminized characteristics of Asian American women to maintain the racial privileges of whites and patriarchal ethos of family and nation. (Nemoto 21)

A more recent stereotype that emerged around the period of the American Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s is that of the "model minority." This refers to Asian Americans, particularly those of Chinese and Japanese origins, being categorised as the ideal immigrants who are not only hard-working, intelligent, and successful, but also "deferential to parental and authority figures," particularly "in comparison with other non-White groups such as Black and Hispanic Americans" (Ruiz et al. "Asian Americans and the 'model minority' stereotype"). According to Chinese American author Frank Chin, this stereotype dictates that:

> Asians are supposed to be restrained, humble, and well-mannered, a people who respect law, love education, work hard, and have close-knit, well-disciplined families. Above all, they are praised for not complaining about or

> protesting against difficulties: they may have problems, but they really do not mind these, and they "take care of their own" instead of burdening "Americans" with their needs by seeking government aid and welfare assistance. (qtd. in E. H. Kim 177)

While it might be perceived as a positive evaluation, this stereotype also poses problems due to the overgeneralisation, inaccuracy, and erasure of individual Asian American experiences. It also generates undue pressure on individuals of the community "to live up to the image and create potentially unrealistic and unreasonable expectations" (Kiang et al.). Noh relates the stereotype pressure created by the "model minority" myth as a form of "everyday trauma" that influences and contributes to Asian American women's mental health struggles and suicidality (316).

These stereotypes against Asian Americans have also been reflected in and widely perpetuated by American popular culture and media. As discussed earlier in this chapter, American newspapers and magazines played a significant role in disseminating the "yellow peril" stereotype in the 19th century. Similarly, in the twentieth century as well as in contemporary times, Hollywood, television, print, and online media have perpetuated the contradictory stereotypes regarding Asian American women. Shirley Hune remarks that the "racialized and sexualized" manner in which "Chinese women entered U.S. history" continues to this day in several forms, "especially in popular culture" (161). Hollywood's depiction of Asian American women has traditionally alternated between the conflicting images of "the dragon lady," the mysterious and treacherous femme fatale who uses her sexuality to

manipulate and control white men, and "the lotus blossom," the submissive, docile, and obedient "China Doll" or "Geisha Girl," who exists solely for the pleasure of the white man (Espiritu 93–94). These tropes reflect the stereotypical patterns of white orientalist fantasy that objectify and fetishise Asian American women, trivialising their complex realities and lived experiences in favour of a two-dimensional portrayal. Gina Marchetti, in her study titled *Romance and the Yellow Peril: Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction,* reveals that Hollywood's representation of Asian women, trapped between the passive, exotic objects of desire and the dangerous, manipulative female villain, corroborates a never-ending cycle of exclusion based on race and gender. She describes the typical "butterfly" trope in Hollywood films, in which,

> a Caucasian man, far from home and its morally moderating influences, falls in love with, and often marries, a young girl from another race and culture. He leaves his young bride, and, back in the West, marries another. When he returns, he discovers his nonwhite wife has had a child, whom he and his white wife adopt. Abandoned by her husband, sacrificing her own happiness for the "good" of her child, the cast-off lover kills herself. (78)

Influenced by orientalist stereotypes, these movies portray these ethnic women as self-sacrificing, delicate butterflies who may be the objects of a white man's desire but are doomed to meet a tragic end to their relationship due to racial and cultural differences. Such reductive portrayals of "Asian femininity as alluring, provocative, and mysterious as well as passive, yielding, and vulnerable" exoticise them and confirm their otherness from the ideal white world of American society (105).

These pervasive archetypes, which are deeply rooted in Orientalism and racial prejudices, have wielded a lasting influence on mainstream public perceptions of Asian American and particularly Chinese American women. Shimizu considers the "hypersexuality in representation as a form of bondage that ties the subjectivity of Asian/American women" (6). These representations act as a kind of 'trap' which confines these women within narrow stereotypes, limits their agency, and reduces them to objects of fetishised desire. These give rise to the phenomenon called "stereotype threat," wherein the existence of negative stereotypes about one's social group or community gives rise to anxieties about conforming to them, disrupting the individual's self-perception and performance (Steele and Aronson, 797). In the case of Asian American women, the hypersexualised and fetishised images perpetuated about their group pressure them to either conform to or actively resist these stereotypes, impacting their own sense of self and identity. These assumptions can have a negative impact on their self-esteem, hindering their ability to fully express their complex identities. For example, Cathy Park Hong, in her book *Minor Feelings,* writes about the fetishisation of Asian women by white men and admits that, in her youth, suspicions of fetishisation caused her to distrust her own "desirousness" and hesitate from pursuing romantic relationships with non-Asians (175). In this way, stereotypes of ethnic minorities, particularly women, become a form of psychological control that silences their voices and erases their actual lived experiences by perpetuating harmful and inaccurate narratives about them.

Yamamoto emphasises the paradoxical condition of Asian American women being hypervisible as racially marked objects while simultaneously being invisible

as subjects within the dominant American discourse (“In/Visible Difference” 52). This implies that, while they are readily seen and recognised as Asian, their identity is always seen as a projection of the perceived characteristics of their ethnic group. Their own individual voices and experiences are often neglected or overlooked. Their racial identity is perceived as their defining characteristic, rather than their own unique perspectives and personalities. Yoon Sun Lee observes how the Asian American body is seen in the dominant American public space as “enduringly out of place” and a “visual provocation,” mainly due to the way they have always been perpetually abstracted and racialised by the dominant society. Mainstream Western society has consistently erased Asian American “concrete histories” and “singular features”, often resulting in the misguided assumption that one Asian body may be substituted for another (167). This orientalist abstraction of Asian identities contributes to another persistent stereotype—that all Asians “look alike”—an inaccurate perception repeatedly reinforced by Hollywood’s longstanding practice of miscasting Asian and Asian American characters, such as by having a Chinese actress play Korean or Japanese characters or vice versa. Shimizu considers this “a violent homogenization of Asian American women who are lumped together in representation where cultural and other specificities are obscured and eclipsed by hypersexuality” (13–14).

When discussing the racialisation of Chinese and other Asian ethnicities in America, it is important to consider the crucial role played by phenotypic markers in influencing how they are positioned within the dominant social order. Phenotype refers to an individual’s “observable traits,” including height, skin and hair colour,

shape and colour of the eye, facial structure, and blood type ("Phenotype"). For Chinese Americans, these phenotypic markers tend to be viewed through racialised lenses, construing them as perpetual foreigners and cultural outsiders no matter whether they were born in the United States or not. Characteristically Asian and Chinese physical attributes, such as epicanthal folds (or 'slant eyes'), skin colour, facial features, and hair colour, serve as visible indicators of their ethnicity and race, distinguishing them from the dominant white population and making them susceptible to racial profiling, stereotypes, categorisation, and exclusion. Harvey Gee considers the dominant separation of Asian Americans as "perpetual foreigners" and outsiders, thereby entitling them to "lesser standards of protection than 'true Americans,'" as a form of racial and cultural profiling. Gee cites the wartime internment of Japanese Americans, the John Huang campaign finance scandal, and the Wen Ho Lee espionage scandal as examples of Asian profiling (778–9). Incidents of hate crimes, physical violence, and microaggressions often specifically target Asian American women, causing trauma and contributing to their feelings of alienation. For instance, Cathy Park Hong examines the life and death of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, an Asian American artist and poet who was raped and murdered in 1982. Hong criticises the lack of media coverage of the crime and suggests that Cha's Asian identity made her invisible and insignificant to the mainstream American public, who considered her only as an "Oriental Jane Doe." She goes on to talk about how Asian women are forced, from an early age, to remain silent about sexual assaults and harassment due to the culture of silence and shame surrounding them (151–175). Hwang and Parrenas attribute the incidents of violence against Asian women to their "gendered racialization" as "villainous temptresses," a

paradoxical image that “renders them sexually desirable yet a threat to the social order and thereby expendable.” In the wake of historical and even recent prejudices connected to the COVID-19 pandemic, the gendered racialisation and hypersexualisation of Asian women often culminated in incidents of violence against them, like the 2021 murders of six Asian women by a white man (567–68).

Possibly due to their greater demographic visibility and long-standing historical prejudices specifically targeting them, Chinese American women are particularly susceptible to these gendered and racialised stereotypes and incidents of hostility (Ruiz et al. “Appendix”; Wang et al.). Being one of the earliest Asian groups to migrate to America in significant numbers, the Chinese community formed an early racial prototype for the American social system to model and codify their exclusionary attitudes and policies against (E. Lee, “The Chinese Exclusion Example” 53). Particularly Chinese women, who were culturally and legally labelled as morally deviant and fundamentally foreign, became a template for how Asian women would be treated by American society: as hypersexualised or submissive, unassimilable aliens, or model minorities. Since the Chinese women were initially scarce in number, their rarity made them stand out even more. This visibility subjected them to hyper-interpretation through narrow stereotypical frameworks, resulting in their greater exoticisation and objectification both in popular culture and the mainstream public imagination. This condition aligns with Bhabha’s explanation of stereotype as both “fixity” and “fantasy,” which, while creating the illusion of stable knowledge, masks anxieties about racial and sexual difference. Rather than reducing attention, their initial scarcity elevated the dominant fetishistic gaze upon

them, making the Chinese women metaphors for larger concerns of immigration, sexuality, and national identity. The contradictory stereotypes of submissiveness and hypersexuality functioned via a split logic: concealing desire on the one hand ("narcissistic identification") while registering lack and threat ("aggressive identification") on the other (Bhabha 110). This resulted in the Chinese women being reduced to racialised fetishes, whose overdetermined portrayals as exotic, docile, alien, and immoral represented less about themselves and more about what the dominant culture wanted to believe about them.

Therefore, it becomes clear that the herstory of Chinese migration in the United States has always been marked by the exoticisation of early immigrants like Afong Moy, discriminatory immigration laws that selectively prevented their arrival to US shores, and pervasive stereotypes such as the "yellow peril," "Chinese prostitute," "dragon lady," "lotus blossom," and the "model minority." As revealed in the above discourses, Chinese American women have historically been subjected to gendered racialisation, moral condemnation, sexual objectification, fetishisation, hypervisibility as racialised subjects, and invisibility as individual agents. This persistent exoticism and objectification, along with the combined realities of racial discrimination and gender biases, all contributed to the unique challenges faced by Chinese-ethnic women within the white-dominated American society. Their continued misrepresentation and stereotyping in mainstream American narratives highlight the need for focused studies on the specific situations and challenges faced by Chinese American women throughout history, from the earliest migrations to contemporary realities.

To fully appreciate the importance of exploring the herstories of Chinese American women, it is important to recognise their continued erasure from mainstream American history. Noting the neglect of Chinese American women by historians in America, Huping Ling classifies the U.S. historiography of Chinese Americans into three periods, out of which the first period, from the 19th century to the 1960s, had passed with a complete neglect of Chinese women. While the 1960s and 1970s saw historians beginning to study them as part of the larger Chinese American history, it was only in the 1980s that they began developing “independent works” on them (6). Further, Ling provides a comprehensive history of Chinese American women from the mid-19th century to the late 20th century, highlighting their immigration experiences, challenges, family lives, and stereotypes, as well as their contributions to American society. She discusses the creation of “bachelor societies” of Chinese Americans due to restrictive immigration policies in the 19th and early 20th centuries, which significantly hindered Chinese women's immigration to America. According to Ling, the natural calamities and internal turmoil of late 19th-century China served as the “push” factors, and “a strong desire for family reunion, economic pursuit, and the will for personal fulfilment” served as the “pull” factors that motivated Chinese women’s migration to America in the 19th century (20). Despite the exclusion laws, some women made their way to the USA by illegal means, such as smuggling or by impersonating family members of Chinese American merchants, who were exempted from the exclusion laws. During the period between 1910 and 1940, many of the Chinese immigrants who had arrived in San Francisco by sea were initially housed under dehumanising conditions at Angel Island Immigration Center, which was actually a “a detention center for Asian,

mainly Chinese immigrants" (30). Ling addresses the hostilities and stereotypes faced by Chinese immigrant women in America and also provides a detailed account of the crucial roles they played in their families, fulfilling not just domestic duties but also running family businesses and helping on farms. She notes the challenges faced by American-born daughters of Chinese immigrant families, who struggled with their marginal identity due to following Confucian cultural traditions at home while adapting to Western ways outside. Ling also highlights the economic, cultural, and social contributions made by Chinese American women to American society. Through her book, Ling emphasises that Chinese American women were not passive victims but active agents who achieved success in many fields on their own terms and shaped their own narratives in the broader context of American history.

One of the earliest prominent "independent works" on Chinese American women that Ling mentions in her book is *Chinese Women of America: A Pictorial History* by Judy Yung. Using archival research, oral histories, and photographs, Yung documents the lives of Chinese American women from the 19th century to 1985, with a focus on early stereotypes, the prevalence of prostitution, and rural and urban lives, as well as the struggles, challenges, and cultural conflicts faced by the second generation of immigrants. A highlight of Yung's work is her discussion of "A New Consciousness" among Chinese American women, influenced by the civil rights movement and students' movements of the 1960s and 1970s. She notes the participation of women in Chinese American activism, as well as a "growing ethnic consciousness among Chinese American women," which also leads to a growing interest in Chinese American literature. Yung notes the emergence of many new

Chinese American women authors, including Diana Chang, Ruthanne Lum McCunn and Maxine Hong Kingston (96–97). Yung also follows this book with two works on the Chinese women of San Francisco, titled *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (1995) and *Unbound Voices: A Documentary History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (1999). These trailblazing studies by Yung attempt to rectify the historical neglect faced by Chinese American women in mainstream history. In the former volume, Yung uses the traditional Chinese practice of "footbinding" as a metaphor to trace the journey of these women from confinement to empowerment, tracing an inspiring narrative of Chinese women from various social classes who lived in San Francisco during the 19th and 20th centuries. The latter book is a companion piece to the former and collates a curated set of documents written by and about Chinese American women, including reports of immigration interrogations, personal stories, letters, unpublished autobiographical stories and interviews. Taken together, these two books present raw, unfiltered narratives that challenge historical silence by amplifying the marginalised voices of Chinese American women.

Shirley Hune, in her analysis of the available historiography of Chinese American women, attributes their initial erasure to the domination of Anglo-American historians in the discipline, whose "orientalist, Eurocentric, and male-biased lenses" overlooked the Chinese American women (163). These historians considered America's unique national identity to be formed by the experiences of European settlers on the Western frontier. Such a view resulted in the concentration of American historiography on European migrations across the Atlantic, while

suppressing the history of Asian migrations across the Pacific. Their Eurocentric and male-biased lenses shaped what was deemed worthy of historical attention, and Chinese American women and their history did not fit into those schemes. The gradual rise of Asian American studies as a discipline in the American universities from the 1960s to the 1980s resulted in the reclamation of Asian American narratives into the American national historical framework. At the same time, the emergence of women's studies and Asian American women's movements "stimulated interest in Chinese American women's history" (164). With the gradual inclusion of Asian Americans, including women, within the American academic circles, the historiography of Chinese American women has also shifted from narratives of "exotic others, seen as passive objects of history, to historical subjects with agency." Through the incorporation of their lived experiences, perspectives, voices and writings, the "invisibility and marginalization" found in earlier narratives have "given way to centrality and complexity" (176). Hune compares the portrayal of Chinese American women by others to their own self-fashioned representations and observes that while the former misrepresented them as exotic, passive, and victims, the latter's narratives provide more authentic representations of Chinese American women as active subjects who have shaped their histories. Hune's observations point towards the importance of agency in the historiography of minority ethnic groups and communities. Hune's emphasis on the agency of Chinese American women may further be observed in the shift of attitude towards them observed in American society during and after the Second World War.

In a 2002 study titled *Remaking Chinese America: Immigration, Family, and Community, 1940-1965*, Xiaojian Zhao notes the increased opportunities that became available to Chinese American women for the first time during the Second World War, with them being welcomed to work with the armed forces and industries—roles that were earlier dominated by white men. Zhao credits the war with having profoundly changed the lives of Chinese American women, with the larger American society beginning to view their community more favourably and an improvement in the Chinese ethnic community's own attitudes towards their women (49). In fact, this transformation can be evidently observed in some of the works under study in this thesis, including *Fifth Chinese Daughter* by Jade Snow Wong and *Shanghai Girls* by Lisa See.

Most literary works that come under the rubric of Chinese American women's writing deal with the theme of bicultural identity, its development, and its influence on the subjectivities of these women. In the article, "Becoming Bicultural: Chinese American Women and Their Development," researchers Willgerodt, Miller, and McElmurry explore the bicultural experiences of second-generation Chinese American women. They trace the development of bicultural consciousness through several different stages, from recognition of differences in childhood to a blended understanding of cultures in adulthood (478–79). In the present thesis, this psychosocial development of bicultural identity is observed in the autobiographical narratives of Wong and Kingston.

In *Chinese American Women, Identity and Education: A Qualitative Study* (2012), Qing Li observes how the ethnic self-identity of American-born Chinese-

ethnic women is influenced by not just the migration conditions of their parents but also intersects with a socially constructed racial identity, shaped by educational values, social contexts, and stereotypes (250). This kind of intersectional perception of ethnic identity is vital to understanding transcultural subjectivities in Chinese American women's literature, which forms the crux of this research.

Having established the necessary historical context and justified the significance of exploring 'herstories,' it would now be beneficial to make a short survey of Chinese American literature, framed as a subset of Asian American literature. While Asian immigrants and their descendants in the United States have produced sporadic works of literature since the late nineteenth century; it was only during post-1965 that the term "Asian American literature" gained traction. The term replaced the "imprecise term" "Oriental" by connoting a "more objective," "American identity for Asians" (E. H. Kim xii). Considering literature as "expressive" of their "political identity," writers Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong edited an anthology titled *Aiiieeeee!* (1974), which was "groundbreaking" in its attempt to establish a lineage and canon for Asian American literature (Nguyen "The Emergence" 289). Chin and his co-editors' in their introduction to Chinese and Japanese American literature credits the Eurasian author, Sui Sin Far, daughter of a Chinese mother and English father, as "one of the first to speak for an Asian-American sensibility that was neither Asian nor white American" (*Aiiieeeee!* xxi). Apart from introducing a set of prominent Asian American authors, the anthology also defined "a true Asian American sensibility" as "non-Christian, nonfeminine, and non-immigrant" (S. C. Wong 8).

While this definition itself anticipated the controversies that were to arise in the following years involving a few Chinese American women authors, the follow-up volume of the anthology titled *The Big Aiiieeeee!* (1991) heated the discussions even more. In his famous essay titled "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake," Frank Chin condemns the popular Chinese American writers Maxine Hong Kingston, David Henry Hwang and Amy Tan for "boldly fak[ing] the best-known works from the most universally known body of Asian literature and lore in history," and contributing to the Western stereotypes of Asian culture and abetting the emasculation of Asian men by their portrayals ('Come All Ye' 135).

Kingston, in a 1990 MELUS interview with Marilyn Chin, compares this famous literary debate between herself and Chin to a broader pattern of intra-ethnic conflicts observed among Black and Chicanx writers. She considers these critiques from some male Asian American writers about women writers achieving mainstream visibility by colluding with the white gaze as one-sided. She notes that women writers largely choose not to respond to these critiques because they "don't want to be divisive" (66). King-kok Cheung views this controversy as an "inevitable standoff between Asian American cultural nationalists and feminists," and that the negative reactions to Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* stem from an "ethnographic fallacy," which wrongfully assumes an ethnic autobiography to be a representative true account of the author's community (36–37). Elaine Kim dismisses Chin and other male writers' criticisms of Kingston being "anti-male," and even goes on to suggest that the male critics of Kingston suffer from "anti-female biases" as they themselves, in their own works, have portrayed Asian women as "villainesses" while

the men are portrayed as “heroes” (199). Lisa Lowe considers this conflict as one between identity and heterogeneity, in which the male critics of Kingston and Tan “obscure gender” by insisting upon a “fixed masculinist identity” for Asian American literature (*Immigrant Acts* 76).

Frank Chin, in the same essay mentioned earlier, also criticises Asian American “Christian” autobiographies like Jade Snow Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, which, according to him, is part of an artificial Western-inspired genre that has little to do with Chinese literary tradition (“Come All Ye” 139–42). The subject of this criticism, Wong (1922-2006), is one of the earliest Chinese American women writers whose book was received well by readers belonging to both Chinese and non-Chinese communities. She was primarily a renowned ceramic artist and hence was not prolific as a writer. She has written only one more autobiographical narrative titled *No Chinese Stranger* (1975), detailing the trips she made across Asia, including the People’s Republic of China. Although *Fifth Chinese Daughter* was initially well-received, it later faced criticisms from Asian American scholars like Sau-ling Cynthia Wong and Elaine Kim for being accommodationist and catering to Western stereotypes such as that of the model minority. Patricia Lin Blinde accuses Wong of repeating “the white world's articulations and expectations as to what Chineseness is or is not,” and criticises her choice of autobiography as her mode of narration (58). Yin and Paulson respond to this criticism by focusing on Wong’s use of a third-person pronoun in an autobiography and emphasising that she is not presenting a simple autobiography and that she has fictionalised herself to successfully “search for balance within the forces of the fragmented world of

Chinese-American women" (59). Similarly, Erinh Ninh, Christopher Douglas, and Lowell Chun-hoon take a more balanced approach to the work, analysing it within its specific socio-historical context and considering the author's complex sociocultural position as a young Chinese American woman.

Maxine Hong Kingston, born in California in 1940, is a second-generation Chinese American writer best known for her debut work, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976), which got itself embroiled in the controversies involving Frank Chin and other male Asian American writers relating to Chinese American representation, as detailed earlier in this chapter. In addition to Chin mentioned earlier in this section, Benjamin Tong criticised her for being a "fashionable feminist," while Jeffery Chan was critical of *The Woman Warrior*'s categorisation as memoir instead of fiction (qtd. in Grice 18). However, extending Maureen Sabine's endorsement of *The Woman Warrior*'s projection of "women's life histories," Grice recognises the text as itself comprising a "submerged signifying system that centres upon the female life cycle" (31–32). Much research on Kingston has concentrated on her use of the "talk-story" form, with critics calling it "community discourse," "woman-to-woman intimacy," and "counter-memory" (Grice 39; Huntley 66; K. K. Cheung 30). Wendy Ho credits Kingston for expanding the meaning of "talk-story" to include women's stories and subversive modes of narration (Ho 28). Margaret Miller credits Kingston for embodying in her text not only her autobiographical self, but also the "difficulties inherent in the process of self-creation" (14). Anh Hua explores Kingston's construction of a "Chinese American diasporic feminist identity," synthesising both gender and ethnic

perspectives. Victoria Myers examines Kingston's narrative using Pratt's *Speech Act* theory and examines the role of language in the construction of identity. Evelyn Chi'en and Jeehyun Lim have also explored the role of language and bilingualism in the subjectivity formations in the text. Mei Cheng uses the transcultural framework to analyse the "literary hybridity" of Kingston's narrative by revealing the fusion of "Chinese conventional and American postmodern narrative strategies" to produce "new meanings" and "cultural understandings" (210). Overall, the varied responses to *The Woman Warrior* suggest a complex and multilayered text that requires the use of multiple intersectional approaches for a comprehensive analysis. Kingston has also followed her memoir with *China Men* (1980), a collection of narratives about the men in her family; *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989), a novel; *The Fifth Book of Peace* (2003); and *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life* (2011), both memoirs.

Amy Tan (b. 1952) is another renowned and widely read second-generation Chinese American writer whose prolific oeuvre includes novels like *The Joy Luck Club, The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), *The Bonesetter's Wife* (2001), *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2005), *The Valley of Amazement* (2013), as well as the autobiographical works "Mother Tongue" (1990), *The Opposite of Fate* (2003), and *Where the Past Begins* (2017). The critical approaches to Amy Tan have largely concentrated on her earlier novels, with critics focusing on the narrative patterns, autobiographical elements, mother-daughter relationships, cultural identity, and intergenerational trauma, among other themes, primarily in *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*. While many critics

have credited her for her evocative prose and participation in feminist and matrilineal discourses, others like Sau-ling Wong have positioned her within a "quasi-ethnographic, Orientalist discourse" (181). However, her later works, particularly her 2017 memoir *Where the Past Begins*, which forms a focus of the present thesis, have not attracted adequate critical attention.

In spite of Chin's vehement criticisms, Wong, Kingston, and Tan remain among the most widely read, studied, and popular of Chinese American writings. The poignant accounts of cultural identity, intergenerational traumas, mother-daughter relationships, and other aspects of the immigrant experience in these works have been foundational to the discussions on Chinese/Asian American literature. With their focus on individual stories and lived realities, these works have secured a space for the narration and study of women's perspectives at the intersections of culture, gender, and ethnicity.

Moving beyond these pioneering authors, a newer generation of women writers has ventured into various complex themes beyond cultural conflicts and assimilation, exploring identity negotiations in diverse contexts. For example, Lisa See, a multiracial author who deeply identifies with her Chinese heritage, has published several works of historical fiction set in various periods of Chinese and American history. Her debut work, titled *On Gold Mountain: The One-Hundred-Year Odyssey of My Chinese American Family* (1995), is a work of non-fiction family history focusing on the author's great-grandfather Fong See and his white American wife, Lettice Pruett, and the family life that they built in Los Angeles' Chinatown. Her novels include *Snowflower and the Secret Fan* (2003), *Peony in*

Love (2007), *Shanghai Girls* (2009), *Dreams of Joy* (2011), *China Dolls* (2014), *The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane* (2017)*, The Island of Sea Women* (2019)*,* and *Lady Tan's Circle of Women* (2023). The exiguous scholarly attention to Lisa See's novels also concentrates primarily on her earlier novels, *Snowflower and the Secret Fan* and *Peony in Love.* For instance, Furth credits See's historical novels as "the best feminist scholarship on women in the Ming-Qing period," and for imagining a "woman's own account" of the Ming-Qing Confucian social world (19). Considering the novels analysed in the present study, Walter S. H. Lim observes that the portrayal of the Sino-Japanese war in *Shanghai Girls* serves as a "communal memory" haunting the overseas Chinese (15). Melody Yunzi Li analyses the nightclub in *China Dolls* as a dual site for the reconfiguration of identity as well as the performance of stereotypes (1).

Jean Kwok is a contemporary Hong Kong-born Chinese American author who has written the novels *Girl in Translation* (2010), *Mambo in Chinatown* (2014), *Searching for Sylvie Lee* (2019), and *The Leftover Woman* (2023). Her real experiences of immigration from Hong Kong to New York, work at a clothing factory, and life in an old, "unheated, roach-infested apartment" form inspirations for her debut novel, *Girl in Translation* ('About' [Jean Kwok]). Eilola classifies *Girl in Translation* as a novel that deals with a protagonist's linguistic development in a new country. Monica Chiu acknowledges the transnational perspective of the novel with its connection to the 'English-only' movement and attributes the complexity of the novel to its protagonist, Kimberly's inability to separate her 'spheres of influence' at home, school, and factory (187). Jane E. Rose comments on the

severity of the portrayal of the difficult labour conditions and illegal child labour at clothing factories, which is a well-known reality among economically disadvantaged immigrant communities. Chen and Lau analyse the protagonist, Kimberly, in terms of the pressures of being a '*guai'* child or a 'good Chinese girl" in America. Brettel observes the delicate balancing act that Kwok's protagonists attempt between their Chinese and American cultural heritages. Feng examines Kwok's portrayal of New York City in *Girl in Translation* and *Mambo in Chinatown*, as an urban space of dualities and contradictions, offering both opportunity and hardship (72–73). The critical attention on Kwok's novels thus reveals their focus on contemporary experiences of immigration and adaptation, offering portrayals of linguistic and cultural exchanges by Chinese American women within the context of the immigrant narrative.

Yiyun Li was born in Beijing, China, in 1972, during the politically turbulent period of the decade-long Cultural Revolution imposed by Mao Zedong from 1966 until his death in 1976. Although she does not consider herself a political writer, much of her fiction is informed by the sociopolitical landscape and experiences of Communist China, where she grew up. She immigrated to the United States in 1996 to study immunology but later shifted to creative writing and has published several short story collections, essays, novels, and a memoir (Ni). Her major works include *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* (2005), *The Vagrants* (2009), *Gold Boy, Emerald Girl* (2010), *Kinder Than Solitude* (2014), *Where Reasons End* (2019), *Must I Go* (2020)*, The Book of Goose* (2022)*, Wednesday's Child* (2023), and the memoir *Dear Friend, From My Life I Write to You in Your Life* (2017). The critical and scholarly

attention on her fiction and memoir has emphasised her profound engagement with the themes of memory, grief, mental illness, language, identity, and emotional displacement, narrated in the dual backdrops of Communist China and the United States. Goh identifies *Dear Friend* as a "hybrid genre of memoir-writing and essays" and her writing as a way of coping with "the sense of personal failure and its shared unshareability" (542, 546). Khakpour discusses Li's use of literature, particularly the works of authors Nabokov, Turgenev, William Trevor, Katherine Mansfield, and Philip Larkin, as her "anchors," as she uses reading and writing to navigate her struggles with mental health. Prosperi considers Li to be an exophonic writer and focuses on how she avoids any "imprisoning use of language" and how she utilises silences in her fiction, making her work transcend any cultural or political labels (160). Pesaro identifies Li's personal decision of "linguistic de-territorialisation," as acknowledged in *Dear Friend*, as a "question of identity" that is also reflected in her fiction, including "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers" and *The Vagrants* (114). Overall, critical studies on Yiyun Li suggest that her works defy simple categorisation and labelling and offer deeply personal perspectives on the universal themes of language, memory, and identity that transcend cultural and national boundaries. This kind of transcendence of national and cultural boundaries aligns with the tenets of transculturalism, which forms the basic theoretical foundation of the present research.

The review of the existing literature detailed above exposes several significant gaps. Firstly, the existing scholarship on Chinese American women writers shows a disproportionate concentration on the works of the foundational

authors Jade Snow Wong, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Amy Tan, often relating to the debates surrounding representation and authenticity of ethnic experiences. Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, being a canonical text of Asian American literature, has been subject to a high number of critical studies exploring a multitude of aspects, including themes like talk-stories, genre blending, feminism, cultural conflict, language dynamics, and memory, among others. While Amy Tan has also been a subject of much critical attention with respect to her earlier fiction, her later memoir, *Where the Past Begins,* has not been studied by critics. There is also very little scholarly attention paid to the works of the newer generation of Chinese American women writers like Lisa See, Jean Kwok, and Yiyun Li. This scholarly imbalance indicates a dearth of comprehensive studies on Chinese American women's writing, featuring a diverse selection of foundational as well as contemporary authors. As a result, there is also a lack of understanding of the evolution of transcultural storytelling over time within this corpus. Further, the existing studies on these works have largely focused on the diasporic concerns of assimilation and cultural conflict rather than a transcultural framework, which favours an examination of the fluid and continuous negotiation of multiple subject positions and cultural affiliations. Some studies have looked into the interplay of gender and race, but a deeper level of intersectional analysis that elucidates the multiple jeopardies faced by Chinese American women is desired. The present study ventures into a diverse approach that looks at how gender, race, class, and ethnicity interact with the discourses of memory, language, and spatial navigation that inform ethnic women's experiences. The study also aims to contribute to discussions about the historical erasure of Chinese American women by examining the literary

expressions that bring their voices to the forefront. Employing transcultural and intersectional perspectives, the present study endeavours to achieve a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of Chinese American women's literature.

For its theoretical framework, this study combines the principles of transculturalism, feminist theory, and intersectionality as the foundational theories on which its analyses are based. In addition to this, some concepts from the disciplines of memory studies, linguistics, and spatial theory are employed to examine how memory, language, and space function as transcultural contact zones in Chinese American women's narratives. To inform this eclectic theoretical framework, this research draws concepts from a range of theorists, including Fernando Ortiz, Wolfgang Welsch, Mary Louise Pratt, Arianna Dagnino, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Trinh T. Minh-ha.

Transculturalism—an approach that views cultural identity as fluid, dynamic, and constantly evolving due to cross-cultural interactions—forms the basic foundation for this study. Cuban scholar Fernando Ortiz coined the term "transculturation" in 1947 as a more apt term to replace "acculturation," which describes cultural transitions in environments where multiple cultures come into contact with each other. For Ortiz, transculturation entails a series of "complex transmutations of culture" that involves not only an acquisition of a new culture (acculturation) but also a "deculturation," or the "loss or uprooting of a previous culture." This results in "neoculturation," or the formation of new cultural phenomena which are both similar and distinct from the two parent cultures (97–

103). Ortiz's interpretation brings something new into the discourse of cultural mixing by considering it not as a simple one-way process of adoption of a new culture but as a multi-faceted process that involves the blending of various cultural influences leading to the creation of something entirely new. Ortiz explains this phenomenon in the Cuban context by elucidating the transactions between indigenous cultures, Spanish colonisers, African slaves, and other immigrants from other parts of the world. Each of these groups brought with them their own unique traditions and practices, which fused together and were transformed and reshaped in the process. This continuous process of cultural fusion is what Ortiz terms transculturation.

Welsch uses a similar term, "transculturality," to describe a relationship between cultures that is characterised not by separation but by "entanglement, intermixing and commonness" (205). Transculturation stresses the power dynamics between dominant and non-dominant cultures, while transculturality is more about the plurality of self and intermingling between cultures in a more globalised contemporary world. Transculturality is a kind of "multi-situatedness," designating a "chameleonic disposition for strategically rearranging one's sense of cultural identity by drawing from an expanded repertoire—according to the moment, context or location" (Benessaieh 27–28).

The present study uses a combined approach, which offers a more comprehensive analysis of the select Chinese American women's texts. While Ortiz's concept accounts for the asymmetrical power relations in initial immigrant experiences, Welsch's idea captures the fluid, hybrid identities that emerge in later

contexts. This synthesised approach allows for an understanding of transcultural subjectivities that evolve across diverse temporal, spatial, and linguistic contexts.

The concept of "contact zones," developed by Mary Louise Pratt, provides a spatial and analytical framework for the understanding of these transcultural exchanges. Pratt defines "contact zones" as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – such as colonialism and slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today." Pratt further goes on to define transculturation as a "phenomenon of the contact zone" and also emphasises the subordinate group's agency in selecting and reinventing the elements of dominant culture transmitted to them (Imperial Eyes 7, 184). While Pratt formulates this term in the context of colonial relations, she also acknowledges its "aftermaths," which constitute the phenomena of diaspora and neoliberal globalisation that resulted in an "epochal shift in global relationships at the end of the twentieth century" (238). According to Appadurai, in the current century of global cultural flows, the circulation of cultural forms such as narratives, images, and linguistic practices "produces new and distinct genre experiments, many of which are forced to coexist in uneven and uneasy combinations." Cultural forms do not simply mix with each other; rather, they "cohabit" to "produce new contexts through their peculiar inflection of each other" (10). In this changing context of "globalizing impulses," the meaning of contact zones may be extended beyond geographical borders to "encompass cultural, social, and artistic borders" (J. E. Kim 157–58). This broadened, metaphorical understanding of contact zones permits the interpretation of

‘memory,’ ‘language,’ and ‘space’ as not just simple thematic elements but as contact zones themselves, that is, the sites of negotiation, conflict, and hybridity where transcultural subjectivities are actively generated and challenged. Such a framework helps in analysing how the select Chinese American women’s narratives depict these zones as lived and imagined domains constructed by the concerns of diaspora, personal and cultural memory, linguistic negotiations, and spatial reconfigurations.

Gloria E. Anzaldúa’s conceptualisation of the borderland as “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary,” which is in a “constant state of transition,” further informs this discussion (25). This perspective emphasises the emotional and psychological complexities of transcultural experiences for those who occupy multiple cultural boundaries. These spaces are the liminal sites where internal conflicts and transcultural negotiations shape identities. These liminal spaces and scenarios give rise to “transcultural writers,” who

> . . . by choice or because of life circumstances, experience cultural dislocation, follow transnational life patterns, cultivate bilingual or plurilingual proficiency, physically immerse themselves in multiple cultures, geographies, or territories, expose themselves to diversity, and nurture plural, flexible identities. (Dagnino 1)

The Chinese American women writers selected for study in the present thesis embody this definition of transcultural writers by their navigation of their dual cultural affiliations and plural identities.

Another core theoretical concept that informs the discussion of this research is intersectionality, developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw. Crenshaw criticises identity politics for neglecting "intragroup differences." She asserts that the experiences of women of colour are shaped by the intersection of both gender and race. Therefore, only an intersectional approach can fully explain the multiple and overlapping forms of discrimination faced by women of colour (1242–44). This observation then leads the present discussion into the fields of Third World and Asian American feminisms, which are greatly informed by Crenshaw's intersectionality politics. Third World feminism, informed largely by the tenets of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, critiques white global feminism for its universalising approach towards patriarchy, assuming that women around the world experience patriarchy in the same way (Herr 5). Another precursor to Asian American feminism is the intersectional analysis of Trinh T Minh-ha, who engages with the theme of minority ethnic women's subjectivity through discussions on self-expression, language, storytelling, and history.

Lisa Lowe, another Asian American scholar, foregrounds the importance of adequately understanding the diversity and dynamic nature of Asian American culture beyond the perceptions of monolithicity. In her book *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (1996), Lowe analyses how the state-imposed immigration policies and exclusion have shaped Asian American cultural politics and how cultural production serves as a crucial site of resistance for Asian Americans (12, 31). Asian American feminism is an emergent field of inquiry which aligns with and derives from Third World feminism, which was "co-created" by

Asian American feminists by joining hands with other women of colour in sharing ". . . their mutual and divergent experiences of racialization and patriarchy as well as identifying and working toward common political goals" (Wu 45). Fujiwara emphasises "multiplicity" as the basic tenet of praxis in Asian American feminism, which necessitates the recognition and acknowledgement of the differences within Asian America, including the multiple positionalities and "valences of power" that shape Asian American experiences (248). Only through an acknowledgement of multiplicities and "incommensurabilities" can Asian American feminisms engage effectively with Women of Colour politics (257-58). The principles of heterogeneity and multiplicity laid down by Lowe and Fujiwara form an important basis for understanding the diverse and intersectional experiences of Chinese American women in the present study.

Employing a qualitative approach and using textual analysis as its primary methodology, the present study examines a selection of personal and fictional narratives by Chinese American women writers. A close reading of the texts is performed by integrating core theoretical perspectives, including transculturalism, contact zones, intersectionality, and gender, as detailed above. In addition to these core perspectives, some basic concepts from the disciplines of memory studies, linguistics, and spatiality studies also inform the analysis of these texts. Memory, language, and space are treated as transcultural contact zones where identities and fluid subjectivities are negotiated. The study's centring of women's voices and experiences aligns with the concept of 'herstory,' thereby challenging the traditional male-centric narrative tradition of Chinese American migration and adaptation. The

data collection process involves the identification of a corpus of Chinese American women's autobiographical and fictional narratives and the selection of the specific authors and texts for analysis. The specific authors and texts are chosen with regard to their significance within the corpus, popular and critical reception, as well as their engagement with the themes of transcultural identity, gender, ethnicity, memory, language, and space. Scholarly articles, critical essays, and theoretical and historical texts are used as secondary and tertiary sources to provide the required context and support for the analysis. Such a diverse selection of texts and theoretical approaches designs a multidimensional analytical framework, enabling a nuanced exploration of the transcultural subjectivity formations in select Chinese American women's narratives within the contact zones of memory, language, and space.

The analysis section of the present thesis is divided into three core chapters, each focussing on one of the three contact zones that have been identified, namely, memory, language, and space. Chapter One, titled "Narrating Memory and Herstory in Transcultural Contexts," explores how memory mediates transcultural identities and how its narration foregrounds the forgotten stories of women. The chapter focuses its analysis on the personal narratives of seminal authors, Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior,* and Amy Tan's *Where the Past Begins*. It examines how these authors navigate the complexities of their cultural identity, and challenge dominant narratives by telling "herstories." The authors' unique narrative styles, blending of genres, mixing autobiographical memory with fiction and myth, and archival storytelling are studied as strategies in herstorying and transculturisation. The chapter also validates

multiple subject experiences as contributing to the multiplicity and heterogeneity in the study of Asian American literatures.

Chapter Two is titled “Bilingual Borders: Language Anxieties and Choices in the Contact Zone.” Focusing on the themes of bilingualism, language anxieties, and choices in the linguistic contact zones between Chinese and English, this chapter examines how the writers employ language as a strategy in the navigation of their transcultural subjectivities. The works considered here are *The Woman Warrior* by Kingston, “Mother Tongue” and *Where the Past Begins* by Amy Tan, *Dear Friend, From My Life I Write to You in Your Life* and “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers by Yiyun Li, as well as *Girl in Translation* by Jean Kwok. The chapter observes that while Kingston and Tan embrace their bilingual personhood and heritage, Yiyun Li complicates the discussion by deliberately alienating herself from her mother tongue, Mandarin. Kwok’s novel is considered a linguistic bildungsroman in which the protagonist’s process of self-translation from Cantonese to American English mirrors her pursuit of the American dream. The chapter explores the multiple roles played by language as a repository of cultural identity and memory, as well as a site of struggle, empowerment, alienation, and self-reinvention.

Chapter Three, which is titled “Transcultural Spaces: Situating Self in the Contact Zones,” explores the concept of transcultural spaces, considering them not simply as the backdrop to storytelling in select works of Chinese American women’s fiction, but as active forces in influencing and shaping the identities of the protagonists. The works analysed here are the novels Shanghai Girls and China Dolls by Lisa See, as well as Girl in Translation and Mambo in Chinatown by Jean

Kwok, both highly prolific authors in contemporary Chinese American literature. The transcultural spaces, including domestic spaces like homes and public spaces like cities, ethnic enclaves, schools, workplaces, and performance spaces, inform and shape the transcultural subjectivities of the female protagonists in these novels. These spaces variously function as sites of confinement, liberation, discrimination, and empowerment in these novels.

The concluding chapter synthesises the findings in the preceding chapters and restates how the elements of memory, language, and space function as vital contact zones shaping the transcultural subjectivities in the select personal and fictional narratives by Chinese American women. It stresses that these narratives challenge assimilationist models of understanding identities by instead foregrounding a transcultural mode of subjectivity formation. The conclusion also reiterates the importance of 'herstories' in countering the historical erasures of ethnic women's narratives by the dominant patriarchal society. It also discusses the continuity of themes as well as the diachronic evolution of transcultural storytelling in Chinese American women's narratives. The chapter accentuates the contribution of the present study to constructing more inclusive and multifaceted perspectives in understanding the experiences of Asian American women.

The recommendations chapter of the thesis states the limitations of the current study and also suggests areas for future research within Chinese American women's literature and in the broader field of multi-ethnic American literature.

Chapter One

Narrating Memory and Herstory in Transcultural Contexts

Examining the history of minority discourse in the United States of America, autobiographical narratives have maintained a position of immense prominence and importance. In a majority white-dominated cultural landscape such as that of the United States, all non-white minority cultural groups, like Black Americans, Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans, are often attributed the titles of 'ethnic' communities or 'people of colour.' From the slave narratives in the nineteenth century to present-day autobiographies, life writings from people of colour have served to bring to mainstream notice individual as well as collective experiences of migration, discrimination, and assimilation. Biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, and other personal writings from the oppressed minority writers serve to break the silence surrounding the complex experiences related to migration and displacement, border crossings and relocations, cultural identities, and individual subjectivities. An impediment faced in the study of minority life writing was the prevailing tendency to consider individual minority autobiographies as 'representative' true accounts of the life of an entire ethnic community. Such generalisations carry the risk of stereotyping and often defeat the purpose of these writings, that is, to validate the multiple voices and perspectives of minority experience, which have so far been neglected and erased from the dominant cultural imagination. While some minority writers may share some

collective cultural experiences with most members of their ethnicity, their interpretations of these specific cultural elements will be coloured by their own subjective experiences, overlapping and in dialogue with experiences related to their gender, sexuality, class, age, and degree of assimilation to the dominant culture, among other factors. Therefore, the term 'personal narrative' is more suitable to describe, in general, the minority autobiographical writings discussed here. This chapter analyses select personal narratives by pioneering Chinese American women writers, considering them within the framework of minority life writing as well as Asian American life writing. Here, acclaimed autobiographical writings by eminent Chinese American female authors, namely Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1950), Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976), and Amy Tan's *Where the Past Begins: A Writer's Memoir* (2017), are treated as theoretically informing minority texts, and they are examined for their genre-defying, self-conscious narrative styles, as well as their engagement with the themes of personal and cultural memory, history, identity, and cultural negotiations. By using the phrase 'theoretically informing minority texts,' the researcher suggests that these are texts that engage with and contribute to broader deliberations on memory, history, identity, and cultural negotiation in the context of minority ethnic experiences, rather than being simple life stories. Autobiographical writings by eminent Chinese American female authors Jade Snow Wong, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Amy Tan are analysed as minority-ethnic and transcultural texts for their genre-defying styles and engagement with memory, history, identity, and cultural negotiations. It is observed that, through their unique interplay of memory, history, traditional, and dominant cultural elements, these

narratives by Chinese American women assert and embrace their multiple consciousness as well as transcultural and gendered subjectivities. By focussing specifically on women's experiences, these personal memory narratives contribute to the telling of the herstory of Chinese American migration.

Amanda Kearney, in an article titled "Ethnicity and Memory," suggests that ethnicity "is the ultimate memory project" and that "[m]emory and collective consciousness mesh with self-identification to shape a sense of belonging and affiliative membership within a real or imagined community" (132). Autobiographical memory" being "the core of identity" (Fivush 13), writers belonging to minority ethnicities often use autobiographical writings as a method of not just self-expression but also of identity constructions and self-formations. Life itself being constitutive of the stories we tell of ourselves and others, life-writing thus becomes a performative project of negotiating personal and collective memories, as well as shared histories. Cultural and ethnic identities are formed partially through these intersubjective dialogues between individual and collective memories, shared and passed between generations. Therefore, for minority writers in particular, personal narratives are not simply the means of representing themselves or their communities but part of an active process through which their identities and subjectivities are formed.

In tracing the history of Asian American autobiographies, Traise Yamamoto delineates the different strains through which they developed throughout the years, from the late nineteenth century. Yamamoto observes that most of the earliest examples, like Yan Phou Lee's *When I Was a Boy in China* (1887), Etsu Sugimoto's

A Daughter of the Samurai (1925), New Il-Han's *When I Was a Boy in Korea* (1928), and Younghill Kang's *The Grass Roof* (1931), are written by authors who were born and had spent a large portion of their lives in Asia. These were more ethnographic than autobiographical in that they "largely confirmed dominant cultural notions of Asian foreignness and exotic customs that stand in sharp contrast to Western modernity and U.S. American cultural practices." However, there were also deviant voices like that of Edith Eaton (Sui Sin Far) who in her short autobiographical essay titled "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian," mostly avoided this "auto-orientalism" and represented in raw terms the effects of racism and sexism in her life as a biracial Eurasian individual in Western society. The second generation of Asian American autobiographers, mostly American-born citizens who also experienced the world wars, wrote what Yamamoto calls "witness-narratives," which "historically document[ed] Asian American experiences of immigration, war, displacement, social marginalization, and economic hardship that have been fundamentally shaped by U.S. policy, laws, and international relations." These largely included the narratives of Japanese-Americans who documented their experiences of xenophobia and racism, as well as their life within internment camps in the context of the Second World War. Filipino American writer Carlos Bulosan is credited as beginning of the Asian American "fictionalised autobiography," which was later pioneered by Maxine Hong Kingston in *The Woman Warrior* (380–82).

Considering Chinese American literature, although autobiographies and memoirs indeed enjoy a preeminent position in its history; their importance and validity have been subjected to much debate and controversy from within the

community itself. For example, Frank Chin, the pioneering figure of "Chinaman" literature, in a 1985 essay titled "This Is Not An Autobiography," famously objects to the tradition of Asian American autobiography as a "peculiarly Christian literary weapon" that propagates the trope of "rescue from the perverse, the unnatural, and cruel Chinese" (qtd. in Yamamoto 379). According to Chin, Chinese American literature should model itself on the heroic tradition of Chinese literature derived from its ancient history, whereas these autobiographies glorified the Christian self-actualisation narrative based on confession and conversion. According to him, there has been traditionally no autobiographical genre in Chinese literature, and therefore the Chinese American autobiography is itself a fake genre. He accuses popular writers like David Hwang, Jade Snow Wong, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Amy Tan of faking the traditional Chinese history and culture, as well as of portraying Chinese men as emasculated and undesirable (F. Chin 134–35). However, such criticisms, based on binary understandings of East-West cultures, should warrant contestations in light of the present transcultural discourses in cultural theory, in which the notion of cultures as fixed, disparate entities intrinsically linked to national boundaries is problematised to look at cultures as always engaging in dialogue with each other and cultural identities as always in the process of forming and reforming. In fact, Asian American feminist critics like King-kok Cheung, Elaine Kim, and Amy Ling have countered Chin's arguments as exposing patriarchal convictions and have upheld the validity of the subjective experiences expressed by the Chinese American autobiographers who were subject to the vehement criticisms of Chin. In her article "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences," Lisa Lowe asserts that the "boundaries and definitions of

Asian American culture are continually shifting and being contested from pressures both 'inside' and 'outside' the Asian origin community" (258). An Asian American is therefore often subject to multiple identities and experiences within and outside the ethnic framework. These include experiences related to race, class, gender, sexuality, age, body, profession, and various other sociocultural and political concerns. Lowe concurs with Elaine Kim in seeing this whole debate as a "symptom of the tensions between nationalist and feminist concerns in Asian American discourse." Lowe further interprets this tension as a debate about identity and difference, where some, such as Chin, insist on a fixed masculinist identity, while others, such as Kingston, Tan, or feminist literary critics like Shirley Lim and Amy Ling, repeatedly challenge this notion of identity through their representations of female differences and critiques of sexism in Chinese culture. Therefore, Frank Chin's and others' criticisms of fellow Chinese American writers, based on fixed notions of cultural authenticity and masculine identity fall through, considering that these Chinese diasporic writers, including Chin himself as well as autobiographers like Jade Snow Wong and Maxine Hong Kingston, write from liminal, borderland positions not just at the interstices of Chinese and American cultures but also of other socio-political factors, including gender, class, and sexuality. Therefore, Chin and others' experiences with negotiating their cultural memory need not, and would not, be the same as those of writers like Wong, Kingston, and Tan, all of whom are positioned at different locations within the Chinese American socio-cultural spaces. As James E. Young opines in his preface to *The Texture of Memory,* an individual's memory is ultimately her own, and therefore the memories narrated in the works discussed here must be considered as part of the subjective experiences of the respective writers. They are

not to be mistaken for the unified collective experience of the whole Chinese American community. At the same time, individual or group memories are also enriched and coloured by the memories shared by one's ancestors, family members, peers, and even apparently unrelated agents who might possess similar memories. Therefore, if we regard a published autobiographical book as a sort of memorial, it becomes, in Young's terms, a site of "collected memory" — "the many discrete memories that are gathered into common memorial spaces and assigned common meaning" (xi). Young's term "collected memory" provides a space for evoking the multiple subjective experiences that discrete individual memories are associated with. In this light, this chapter argues for the validity of the multiple subjective experiences collected and expressed by the selected women writers through their personal narratives. By shedding light on their subjective experiences with regard to migration, ethnicity, racism, and gender discrimination, these writers contribute to the multiplicity, heterogeneity, and transculturality of Asian American voices through their autobiographical writings.

Many of the Chinese American women's personal narratives exhibit a precarious relationship with the genre of autobiography itself. One important point of contention of Chinese American women writers with respect to autobiographical writings concerns the use of the first-person pronoun 'I' in the subject position. The subject 'I' in the Western tradition of autobiography celebrates the Enlightenment ideal of the independent (male) individual. In fact, much of the twentieth-century Western feminist discourse on women's writing has centred on this default male-preferentiality of the conventional I-subject position, from which women's voices

and experiences are excluded and alienated by means of a language built by men, for men. Pioneer women writers and thinkers, including Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Monique Wittig, have commented extensively on the handicap suffered by women in the gigantic shadow of the male subject and the male language that has dominated the literary canon throughout history. Trinh T. Minh-ha, one of the prominent figures in Asian American literary and film theory, in her book *Woman, Native, Other,* calls women-writers "language-stealers," implying that women throughout history have had to hide and conceal their writings, "less from a subjection to man than from an acute awareness of emptiness—emptiness through (his) power, through (his) language, through (his) disguises." By citing examples of writers such as Lady Murasaki, Madame Lafayette, and Anaïs Nin, Trinh says that this stolen language cripples women writers by always remaining "that other's language" (19–20). Now, when one thinks of minority ethnic women venturing to write in the dominant language, this difficulty takes on an even more crucial form, as they have to struggle with not just a male language but also a dominant white language to find a subject position almost from emptiness. Minority women writers are, according to Trinh, "therefore triply jeopardized: as a writer, as a woman, and as a white language" (28). This "triple jeopardy" is only one part of the worries of the Chinese American woman writer, who is also conflicted by the lack of an autobiographical tradition in their indigenous Chinese literature, as pointed out by Frank Chin himself in his criticism of Chinese American autobiographies. In Confucian-influenced Chinese culture, the individual self is preferably suppressed in favour of collectivistic values emphasising the greater good of the family and the community. Filial piety, family

loyalty, obedience, and subordination to one's elders and superiors are the ideals given importance to in a collectivistic culture such as the Chinese. This cultural trait of suppressed individualism, combined with the larger patriarchal society, as well as the triple jeopardy mentioned earlier, becomes a factor that inhibits the finding of an adequate voice and language to put their subjectivity and experience into words. Traditional genre divisions of Western literature, such as prose, poetry, fiction, non-fiction, autobiography, etc., are also to be considered, along with language, as constricting these multiply-jeopardised minority women writers from adequately expressing their experiences. As a result, the Chinese American woman writer, in her struggle to overcome these multiple jeopardies, shows ambivalence to genre forms, experiments with subject positions, and combines fiction, autobiography, memory, myth, and history to tell 'herstories.'

One of the earliest important Chinese American women's personal narratives that exhibit these ambivalences is Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, first published in 1950. Beginning her introduction to the 1989 edition of the book, Wong acknowledges that part of the purpose of her writing of the book was to create "a better understanding of the Chinese culture on the part of the Americans." This mantle of the "cultural ambassador" (E. Kim 33) was admittedly necessitated by the lack of writings, at the time, "published from a female Chinese American perspective" (J. S. Wong vii). Wong's memoir, in the earliest years following its first publication, charmed readers and critics alike, with the book becoming a bestseller, especially among the white American readership. Even the American government noticed the book's potential as a cultural ambassador during the Cold War era and

provided Wong with a grant for a book tour in Asia, also taking initiative to translate the book in different languages, including Chinese and other Asian languages. However, in the 1960s and 1970s, the changing socio-political scenario greatly altered the perception of the book, and prominent Asian American critics like Frank Chin, Sau-ling Wong, Elaine Kim, and others began criticising Wong's memoir for its apparent "accommodationist rhetoric," "self-orientalizing point of view" reinforcing white stereotypes of the Chinese American community, of perpetrating the 'model-minority' trope, and in general putting forward a simplistic ethnographic narrative (Bow xii). In "Immigrant Autobiography: Some Questions of Definition and Approach," Sau-ling Cynthia Wong writes that Jade Snow Wong, a second-generation immigrant, frames her "*bildung*" as rebelling against Old World values, but her narrative reveals "a more complex struggle." In her book, Jade Snow Wong highlights the challenges of adapting to a new culture, the conflicts within her family, and the fusion of traditional and Western elements in her life as an immigrant girl in America (302). While Wong delivers "fragrant fictions of Chinese culture/Chinese American life rather than to confront unbankable realities," Erin Ninh reminds us that, as a "young girl from a highly protective household," Jade Snow Wong probably had little experience of the grittier realities of Chinatown life (117). Christopher Douglas observes that Wong's narrative is ethnographic in two ways: firstly, it oriented towards the white American audiences giving them knowledge about the Chinese American community, and secondly, in translated forms, providing the "Asian people with a sociology of America" (104). The "autoethnographic authority assumed by Wong," that Douglas points out (117), may be explained by the fact that Wong's 1950 book is classified among the earliest

prominent works of literature in English that came out of the Chinese American community, which had so far been plagued by discrimination and exclusionary practices from mainstream American society as well as the government. Mary Louise Pratt, in defining an autoethnographic text, clarifies that such a text from a minority 'other' does not simply attempt self-representation but does so by engaging in dialogue with the dominant/conqueror's modes of representing them. That is, "they involve a selective collaboration with and appropriation of idioms of the metropolis or the conqueror," seeking "to intervene in metropolitan modes of understanding," and are "often addressed to both metropolitan audiences and the speaker's own community." Pratt regards autoethnography as one of the prominent art forms of the contact zone ('Arts of the Contact Zone' 35). Therefore, if *Fifth Chinese Daughter* is autoethnographic in its rhetoric, it is actually well in keeping with its position at the contact zone between traditional Chinese as well as mainstream American cultures. One of the important features of this autobiographical narrative that sets it apart from other works of this genre in the Western tradition is its rejection of the first-person pronoun as the subject of narration. The author prefers to use her own name as well as the third-person pronoun 'she' to tell her story in a slightly detached way, so that her autobiography almost reads like a novel. In her author's note to the original edition, Wong explains her decision to write her autobiography in the third person as arising "...from Chinese habit. The submergence of the individual is literally practiced. In written Chinese, prose or poetry, the word 'I' rarely appears, but is understood…Even written in English, an 'I' book by a Chinese would seem outrageously immodest to anyone raised in the spirit of Chinese propriety (xiii). Wong further explains in the

1989 introduction that this "third-person singular style" was "rooted in Chinese literary form (reflecting cultural disregard for the individual)." The author asserts that this style has helped her to maintain a "psychological detachment from [her] personal importance" (vii). Reading both the 1950 "Author's Note" and the 1989 "Introduction," it becomes clear that while writing the book, Jade Snow Wong was aware that, to address a mainstream American readership that was largely unexposed to a Chinese American woman's experience, she probably needed to mediate the Chinese cultural experiences in a linear confessional form that they were familiar with. However, simultaneously, she also appears deeply self-conscious of how her story would relate to people of her own ethnicity, who were "raised in the spirit of Chinese propriety" (xiii). Thus, while she chooses to write her memories in the linear, temporal confessional format of the conventional Western autobiography, she replaces the conventional 'I'-subject with the third-person singular subject, which she deems closer to her Chinese self. By deliberately choosing this 'she'-subject over the 'I'-subject, Wong asserts that in a literary tradition that so far favoured the white American male subject position, the story of a female Chinese American subject is worthy to be told. This simple stylistic choice thus enables Jade Snow Wong to disrupt the conventional Western autobiographical tradition that largely privileged white-male subjectivities and experiences. As a transcultural minority 'other' entering the "dominant circuits of print culture", Wong both selectively collaborates with and disrupts the dominant modes of literary expression (Pratt "Arts of the Contact Zone" 35). In doing so, she also designs a transcultural mode in which she can narrate her story, and launch a female Chinese American experience into the American literary imagination.

This female Chinese American experience that Wong seeks to mediate to the mainstream American imagination, is that of the coming of age of the fifth daughter of a Chinese family that had migrated and settled in San Francisco's Chinatown in the early twentieth century. Through her autobiographical narrative, Wong explores how she, as a growing young woman, negotiates and reconciles with native Chinese and dominant American cultural experiences, as well as how she struggles against racial and gendered prejudices. The twenty-eight chapters of the book are partly fictionalised episodic memories from Wong's life, arranged chronologically. They mostly end with some sort of epiphanic realisation of the transcultural, racialised, and gendered borderland position she occupies within American society. The initial chapters describe Jade Snow Wong's life as a little girl growing up in Chinatown, where her world was "almost wholly Chinese," as she navigates the proprieties and improprieties of a Chinese daughter's life. Despite the author's conscious efforts at personal detachment, the narrative still feels quite personal as Wong describes in great detail the little girl Jade Snow's inner confusions as she tries to solve the "constant puzzle" of life, which "[n]o one ever troubled to explain" to her (2-3). This "constant puzzle" was largely due to the drastic differences she encountered between the Chinese and American ways of life—puzzles that no one explained to her, and she was too hesitant to voice them to her family. Wong's writing slips subconsciously into episodes of personal subjective experiences, especially as she describes young Jade Snow's memory of humiliation and shame at being punished almost brutally for her little behavioural improprieties, such as lifting a small square of cloth from a peddler's bag (7). In another instance,

Wong vividly describes a deeply personal childhood memory of Jade Snow in which she made her “acquaintance with her first turkey” during an American holiday week. The sight of the large live bird, ready to be sacrificed for the Thanksgiving dinner, imprisoned on the leg of the dining table frightens the little girl, ultimately prompting the family to perform a traditional Chinese ritual to “out the scare,” led by Jade Snow’s grandmother. Though described in the third person, the frightened and confused feelings of the little girl are felt in a deeply personal fashion, as though the author had momentarily abandoned her project of impersonal detachment:

> It was confusing— that terrible turkey creature, people quietly
>
> watching in the flickering light, Grandmother acting so unlike herself. Then the flames died down, and it was over. The grownups turned on the lights and gave the bewildered child something hot to drink. It was an herb tea brewed in a pot from which she saw Grandmother remove her jade pendant, a piece of gold ore, and a pearl brooch. The presence of the jewellery assured a ‘calming’ and ‘precious’ tea, they told her. Though the tea puckered her mouth, she felt relief for the first time since coming face to face with the turkey. That night, she slept alone peacefully for the first time in days. (J. S. Wong 10)

This vividly visual personal memory also reflects one of the most curiously transcultural moments in the narrative: observation of a typical American holiday ritual followed by the Christian family’s performance of a traditional Chinese ritual led by the non-Christian grandmother. Another significant childhood memory that Wong evokes is an instance where she was injured at an American school during a

baseball game, and the “foreigner” teacher Miss Mullohand had embraced her to comfort her. The feeling of “wonderful comfort” Jade Snow derives from this physical contact with her teacher, whom her Chinese self had considered an authoritative figure so far, both confuses and embarrasses her (21).

> Jade Snow did not tell Mama about the incident. Mama would not understand. Mama would say that she should not have been interested in ballplaying in the first place. But more than that, she was now conscious that “foreign” American ways were not only generally and vaguely different from their Chinese ways, but that they were specifically different, and the specific differences would involve a choice of action. Jade Snow had begun to compare American ways with those of her mother and father, and the comparison made her uncomfortable. (21)

Her confusion and embarrassment stem not simply from the fact that she had never experienced such explicit comforting action from her parents, but rather because she had, for the first time, become acutely conscious of the cultural differences between her family’s Chinese ways and “foreign” American ways. While she had so far considered herself mostly a purely Chinese girl and the non-Chinese others as “foreign” people, the fact that she had enjoyed the “foreign” way of comforting made by Miss Mullohand suggested that she probably had more “foreign” in her than she had previously thought. It also meant that while she may be an American citizen going to an American school, she was a different kind of American, with a different upbringing compared to most of her schoolmates, among whom she could never truly belong. This implied that she was the one who was perhaps the “foreign”

other in this social space, contrary to how she had so far perceived. The discomfort she feels in this episode thus relates to her first realisation of the interstitial position she occupied in the American social space with respect to cultural identity.

While the above incident made Jade Snow realise the liminal cultural position she occupied, the next memory, relating to the birth of her younger brother, the son born in the family after three consecutive girls, provides her with yet another unavoidable fact about her existence. Her brother's birth causes a flurry of excitement in the household, and a feast is held in the baby's honour upon his completion of one month of age. While Jade Snow happily participates in the festivities, a remark by one of her older sisters, that the festivities were held only because "the child is at last a son," and that "[t]here was no such display" during the birth of the daughter who was born before him, puts the gender question into Jade Snow's mind for the first time. It is in this moment of epiphany that Jade Snow begins to question her own place in the family, and this experience irrevocably colours all her future encounters and experiences with a gendered perspective:

> Forgiveness from Heaven, because he was a
>
> brother, was more important to Mama and Daddy than dear baby sister Precious Stone, who was only a girl. But even more uncomfortable was the realization that she herself was a girl and, like her younger sister, unalterably less significant than the new son in their family. (27)

The realisation of her own and her sister's marginal existence within her family remains in the background of Jade Snow's future personal rebellions within her family and in the outside world. Her marginal position as a young girl within the

home culture further complicates the already liminal existence she led within the American sociocultural system. It is this atypical socio-cultural position that had so far not yet been adequately explored in the popular American literary arena that forms the inspiration for Jade Snow Wong to write her story, as the author herself explains in her "Note" to the original edition.

Lowell Chun-Hoon, in an article titled "Jade Snow Wong and the Fate of Chinese-American Identity," comments that Jade Snow Wong represented a transition from traditional Chinese values emphasising "authority, continuity, inclusiveness and asexuality," to American values focussed on "volition, discontinuity, exclusiveness and sexuality" (59–60). This may be considered true, especially when one looks at the confrontations and conflicts Jade Snow had with her traditional Chinese parents throughout her formative years while negotiating her life within Chinatown and outside of it. In the early chapters of Wong's memoir, it was observed that Jade Snow's socio-cultural lives in the Chinese and American environments, hardly ever coincided especially in her childhood. This separation of selves also caused her much confusion and despair, as she could not find ways to negotiate these apparently disparate halves of her cultural selves. But as she matures, it becomes inevitable that her Chinese and American social fields should come into contact and that she should learn to negotiate and find some harmony between the two. This happens only when she herself analyses and reconciles her diverse experiences and memories associated with these two cultures. In much of her memoir, Jade Snow Wong evaluates her individual personal memories and attempts to situate herself within the Chinese American sociocultural space. The early

awareness that young Jade Snow acquires about the marginal position she occupies within both American society and her own family prompts her to think more about her own individual self, something that is in deviance from the teachings of Chinese culture she had received from her father and the Chinese evening school. It is clear that as Jade Snow grows up, the influence of American schooling and the secondary socialisation she undergoes outside of her ethnic community is felt more and more pronounced on herself—she begins to think more in terms of her own individual rights and wishes as opposed to her family's decisions for her, which puts her in a position of confrontation with her father, whom she had so far regarded as the ultimate authority over her life:

> How can Daddy know what an American advanced education can
>
> mean to me? Why should Older Brother be alone in enjoying the major benefits of Daddy's toil? There are no ancestral pilgrimages to be made in the United States! I can't help being born a girl. Perhaps, even being a girl, I don't want to marry, just to raise sons! Perhaps I have a right to want more than sons! I am a person, besides being a female! Don't the Chinese admit that women also have feelings and minds? (J. S. Wong 110)

Jade Snow's confrontation with her family's traditional patriarchal ways reach its pinnacle when she disregards her father's strict forbiddance to go out on a walk at night with a male friend. At this juncture, it is evident that Jade Snow has accepted herself completely as an individual woman who wishes to live forward in a modern American society, in defiance of her family's teachings, which she felt were suitable only to be a woman in "Old China," and not in "a new America" (125). Douglas

calls this event Jade Snow's "declaration of independence" from her Chinese family and attributes this change in her to the influence of "American sociology," a discipline for which she developed a fascination for, during junior college (107).

However, at the same time, Jade Snow realises that she cannot reject her native culture completely and that she has to find a "middle way" for herself in between her native Chinese culture and the "foreign" American culture. She found that she still valued much of the lessons of life she gained from the traditional Chinese teachings she received at home and that knowing the identity and life stories of all her ancestors enriched her personality and kept her grounded to her roots (131). This acceptance of her transcultural identity leads her to a smoother navigation of life both at home and at school. Drawing from both her Chinese and American experiences, Jade Snow successfully delivers a graduation speech that impresses not just her fellow students and teachers but also her own parents, who for the first time acknowledge their daughter's life outside of the Chinatown milieu by inviting her teachers for dinner at a Chinese restaurant. Until then, Jade Snow's comparisons of her family's Chinese and the "foreign" American ways had led to cultural confusion and confrontations; now came the time for reconciliation and acceptance of her transcultural multiple consciousness.

Jade Snow's subsequent education at the prestigious Mills College also paves a smoother way for this cultural reconciliation. Her years at Mills find her interacting with an ethnically diverse group of fellow students, who "were perpetually curious about her Chinese background and Chinese ideologies, and for the first time she began to formulate in her mind the constructive and delightful

aspects of the Chinese culture to present to non-Chinese" (161). Mills College also transforms her mode of studying, from the habituated Chinese method of orderly memorisation, "its tightly bound concern with facts and the Chinese absolute order of things, to concern with the reason behind the facts, their interpretations, and the imminence of continuous change" (163). This transformation also leads her onto a path of greater intellectual freedom, which again points to a western individualistic attribute, as opposed to the traditional Chinese mode of thinking, which more easily subjected itself to authority in keeping with Confucian tenets. An incident during her time at Mills that makes amply clear Jade Snow's double consciousness is a field visit undertaken by her sociology class to her father's factory. While showing her classmates through her home and factory and posing as an interpreter between them and her parents, Jade Snow herself becomes conscious that she has become a third-party observer at her own home. She realises that her gaze at her own family's ways of life has been split into two, one is that of the Fifth Daughter and another is that of an American college student (165). Douglas maintains that the contemporary American sociology that Jade Snow acquires from junior college and university is instrumental in "estranging" her from her parent community and making her a "spectator" to it rather than an insider (108). While this is true to a great extent, it must be noted that although Jade Snow begins to look at her own community's ways of life with a somewhat ethnographic gaze, the reverse is also true. She also begins to engage with the mainstream, white-dominated, individualistic American society using the more community-orientated, collectivist experiences she has gained from her parent community. This is evidently observed during Jade Snow's visit to a large American factory later. During her visit to the large American factory, instead of

thinking in a rational manner about the economic aspects of the two factories in comparison, she found herself thinking more in a collectivistic humanitarian mode inspired by her own life experiences living in proximity to her father's factory:

> Instead of thinking of the economic significance of a big business as against Daddy's small one, Jade Snow was thinking that the boss of this vast establishment could not give his personal attention to train each apprentice to correct habits, nor could he repair a bassinette for a tired worker's baby; nor could his wife sew alongside his employees and invite a hungry worker to have some soup in her factory kitchen. (165)

For Chinese American youth like her, who grew up in Chinatown, work and business were family affairs that could not be separated from their personal lives. As children, Jade Snow and her siblings played in the factory and even helped their parents with factory work often. The factory workers were like extended family to them, and Jade Snow's parents often also took care of the workers' personal needs. Jade Snow's childhood memories of growing up in her Chinatown community, which are filled with images of her father and mother working in close personal association with the workers, clearly influence the perspective with which she analyses and compares the two different factories for her college project. Similarly, in another instance, Jade Snow writes her term paper for an English course on the subject of "The Chinese Novel," in which she compares the English and Chinese treatments of the novel to highlight the distinctness of the Chinese novel "in its development, form, and purpose." The paper becomes so successful as to be chosen

for reading at an English conference. Thus, as she acknowledges, Jade Snow's childhood experience with Chinese arts and literature, as well as her "previous practice in creative writing" affords her "an opportunity to link her past and present learning" (165-6). Therefore, it is clear that Jade Snow's own cultural experiences of growing up in a Chinese household have also influenced the way she looks at mainstream Anglo-American culture. This give-and-take of cultural perspectives helps Jade Snow locate her own transcultural place in between the Chinese and American cultures that she has straddled ever since childhood. As she later acknowledges, Jade Snow's eventual reconciliation with her transcultural identity allows her to move "with increasing confidence and pleasure in the Western world," while also "rediscovering her Chinese community" (211). During this acknowledged rediscovery of Chinatown, Jade Snow is armed with a renewed gaze formed as part of her multiple consciousnesses developed through years of negotiating the contact zones between Chinese and American cultures. After unlearning and relearning her relationship with both cultures, she finally learns to look at the suburbs she grew up in, not as a little Chinese girl but as a young Chinese American woman who has carved her own place in this transcultural milieu.

Like its forerunner, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* also blurs the boundaries between autobiography and fiction. In fact, Kingston goes even further to bend and blend genres, integrating fantasy, Chinese mythology, and history along with personal experiences, family lore, and American realities to form a complex mosaic of stories. Reimagining these stories related to her life in the context of "a larger sense of social history," Kingston

provides “a fuller picture of Asian American history” (Luo 3). While the author labels the narrative as a memoir, it actually delves into the memories of various women, both real and imaginary, who are connected to her life. These include her mother, Brave Orchid; her deceased paternal aunt, No Name Woman; the renowned Chinese warrior, Fa Mu Lan; her maternal aunt, Moon Orchid; her grandmother; a quiet and unnamed Chinese girl at school; and a Chinese poetess, T’sai Yen, who lived in A.D. 175. Unlike Wong, who sticks to a linear timeframe and single narrative voice, Kingston jumps across timelines and storylines, intermingling her narrative voice with those of her mother, kinswomen, and these historical as well as mythical figures. By giving voice to multiple women and their silenced herstories, Kingston is able to depart from the western autobiographical convention of the unified subject and innovate a unique multivocal subjectivity. This may be seen as an illustration of “fluctuant subjectivity,” a dynamic, multiple, and contradictory subjectivity that changes over time and context. According to Sidonie Smith, women’s autobiographies in the twentieth century represent this fluctuant subjectivity by experimenting with different forms, genres, media, and perspectives to challenge the dominant discourses of selfhood and embodiment (20–23). For an ethnic woman autobiographer like Kingston, such a transforming subject position enables the fluidity and complexity of her lived experiences, which are informed by various social, cultural, and personal factors. This allows for a continual negotiation of identity in reaction to these varied factors, also contending with questions of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class, and other intersecting ideas, leading to a fluid and ever-evolving sense of self. The fragmented, discontinuous, and non-linear narratives within Kingston’s memoir recognise the interruptions, disruptions, and

gaps that are typical of memory and experience. Recognising that identities are not fixed or monolithic but instead shaped by ongoing processes of self-reflection, negotiation, and self-representation, such a fluctuant autobiographical subject allows the author to offer nuanced and multidimensional portraits of ethnic female subjectivity.

This autobiographical ethnic female subjectivity that Kingston demonstrates is also transcultural in nature. Arising at the intersection of two or more cultural contexts, transcultural subjectivity encompasses an individual's ability to navigate and assimilate different cultural influences, identities, and experiences. As a storyteller, Kingston is able to use her powerful narrative to seamlessly integrate elements of Chinese and American cultures, highlighting the complex interplay between these cultural influences and how it shapes her own identity, leading to a larger look at her community. Anh Hua argues that Kingston constructs a "Chinese diasporic feminist identity" through the narration of and engagement with "autobiographical, familial, and ethnic collective remembrance" (72). In this project, memory plays a crucial role. "[M]emory narratives" become a screen onto which Kingston projects "her identity as a second-generation Chinese diasporic woman" and is also an "attempt to rewrite both Chinese diasporic memory by challenging its sexism and sexual violence and the national official memory of the United States by pointing to its history of gender inequality, racism, and Orientalism" (74, 94). Through this active engagement and negotiation with both ethnic and dominant national memories, Kingston effectively transculturises her Chinese American

diasporic experiences. It is with this transcultural lens that Kingston approaches and reimagines each fragment of memory and talk-story in her narrative.

Moreover, Kingston adapts her mother's talk-story tradition as a unique storytelling technique to reclaim the silenced voices and forgotten stories of women from her family, community, ethnic history, and mythology. Talk-stories are stories that are transmitted by the elders, especially women, for their children to teach them about the unpleasant and complex realities of life; they are, in short, "stor[ies] to grow up on" (Kingston 6). They were part of "an oral tradition of history, mythology, genealogy, bedtime stories and how-to stories that have been passed down through generations" (Chan). Huntley defines it as a flexible form of "community discourse":

> . . . that incorporates family tales and genealogy, history, familiar adages, folklore, myth, heroic stories, even didactic and cautionary pronouncements that have been handed down—and embellished—by successive generations within an extended clan. Popular proverbs, fables, parables, fragments of literature, and ancient philosophy also find their way into talk-story… (66)

As a form of storytelling, talk-stories are often used by older members of the Chinese community to impart a sense of collective identity and sense of connection within the members of their community. As they are often passed down orally among different generations of family members, they are not static but may be embellished, reinterpreted, and adapted over time, accommodating the evolving needs of each generation. Since they may focus simultaneously on the recent past or living memory as well as the distant history or myths, talk-stories may be considered

a link between the concepts of communicative memory and cultural memory. Communicative memory consists of those memories that are shared between individuals through everyday communication, which "is characterized by a high degree of non-specialization, reciprocity of roles, thematic instability, and disorganization." Communicative memory is therefore limited in its "temporal horizon." Cultural memory, on the other hand, is "characterized by its distance from the everyday," and has its "fixed points" in "fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, observation)" (Assmann and Czaplicka 126–29). As a combination of personal experiences, cultural traditions, myth, and history, talk-stories are both communicative and cultural in nature. By creating a space for dialogue between the distant past, the recent past, and the present, talk-stories help bridge the gap between communicative and cultural forms of memory within the Chinese American community.

Particularly in Kingston's writing, the talk-stories and traditional Chinese myths and legends are consciously blended with her own personal feminist politics, unique narrative style, and diction. She uses these stories to explore the complexities of both cultural and gender identity and highlights the role of memory in shaping individual as well as collective experiences. This helps her to fashion a bicultural and intersectional identity for herself as a Chinese American woman. Helena Grice considers Kingston's version of the talk-story in *The Woman Warrior* as "a form of woman-to-woman intimacy." For Kingston, Grice continues, it is both "an ethnic-specific mode" of discourse deeply rooted in her native culture and family traditions

and, at the same time, serves as “a form of feminist praxis,” by focussing on women’s stories and specific knowledge passed down across generations, creating a collective female narrative (39). Further, according to Wendy Ho, Kingston “expands the talk-story definition, especially to include women’s experiences and imaginative stories,” and “retells traditional stories and/or invents subversive stories to account for the varying social, economic, cultural, and historical circumstances of Chinese women, families and communities in the United States” (28). The women whose stories Kingston retells, such as No Name Woman, Fa Mu Lan, Brave Orchid, Moon Orchid, and T’sai Yen, represent countless other Chinese and Chinese American women who would usually never be part of traditional history. Traditional histories tend to overlook or erase the stories of women, especially those from minority or marginalised communities. By adopting this talk-story technique, Kingston consciously brings to light the voices of marginalised and voiceless women from the personal and collective memories of her family and community.

This ‘herstorying’ is a deeply personal as well as political act—it is both a personal exploration of her own family and community history and a political act of resistance against silencing and exclusion. For instance, in the first story the author narrates in the book is of No Name Woman, a character shrouded in secret and mystery. She was married as a young girl to a man who shortly left to pursue his fortunes in America. She got pregnant long after her husband had left and, upon being raided and terrorised by the villagers, tragically committed suicide by jumping into the family well along with her newborn baby. This is one of the talk-stories that the author’s mother told her in her adolescence as a way of cautioning her daughter

against indulging in physical relationships. No Name Woman, in this version of the story, is an obscure figure condemned to namelessness and erased into oblivion, “as if she had never been born” (Kingston 3). However, Kingston, in her reimagined narrative, tries “to name the unspeakable,” by bringing to life the story and various intricacies of her aunt, whose existence had been denied by her own family (6). In her account of the events, the narrator imparts to her aunt a sense of personality, depicting her as a person with agency and feelings. She also illuminates the hypocrisy that underlies the subjugation of women in traditional patriarchal Chinese families, where sons have the freedom to engage in various adventures, while daughters are expected to “maintain the past against the flood safe for returning” (9). Even in death, the boundary-crossing daughter of the family is discriminated against, as she does not find a place at the ancestral altar of the family where subsequent generations dedicate offerings in worship. Erased out of existence, she “remains forever hungry” even as a ghost (19). No Name Woman’s story demonstrates how cultural norms and power structures dictate what is remembered and what is forgotten. By deliberately silencing her story and refusing to speak her name, No Name Woman’s family completely erases her existence from their family history. This act of forgetting serves not only as a punishment for the offender but also to safeguard the family’s honour by ensuring that the memory of her transgression is erased. The patriarchal system of the traditional Chinese family ensures that the importance of sons and the male lineage is emphasised, as they are seen as crucial for carrying on the family line and honouring the ancestors. Within this rigid system, women’s stories are seen as unimportant and unworthy of recording in family history. As a result, it is easier to deny their existence by

consciously “forgetting” about them. It is ironic that while Brave Orchid uses the story as a way to control her daughter’s behaviour, her narrative also resurrects No Name Woman’s memory and brings her story to light. While the mother’s version of the story was intended to maintain the existing power structure within the family, her daughter uses it as a tool to critique and disrupt the same power structure. The narrator self-reflexively admits her own complicity in her aunt’s erasure by participating in the imposed silence for “the twenty years since [she] heard this story.” In her youth, the narrator “believed that sex was unspeakable and words so strong and fathers so frail that ‘aunt’ would do [her] father mysterious harm” and that her family, even after immigrating to a new country, “needed to clean their name” in order to maintain their respectability among their neighbours and kinspersons “even here.” However, as she grew up, her aunt’s memory continued to haunt her, “her spirit drawn” to Kingston “because now, after fifty years of neglect,” the author was the only one to think about her and “devote pages of paper to her” by writing down her story for the world to read (18-19). The metaphor of devoting paper to the dead aunt contains profound significance here as a form of ancestral worship that the niece was performing for her forerunner in the family. Traditionally, Chinese people believed that deceased people live on in the afterlife and that they require the same comfort and facilities that they had during their life on earth. Therefore, they make personalised offerings by burning paper replicas of various items such as clothing, “underwear, hats, shoes, handbags and jewelry” (Scott 125). By writing about her sympathetically and keeping her memory alive on paper, Kingston thus performs a metaphorical ancestral worship of her deceased aunt, thus

restoring her story not just to their family history but to the larger history of her community.

In her second chapter, titled “White Tigers,” Kingston narrates the mythic tale of Fa Mu Lan, the legendary warrior woman who lends her memoir its title. The story intertwines elements of myth, memory, history, and personal experiences in the transcultural context of Chinese America. By reimagining the traditional Chinese legend of Fa Mu Lan, the author converts it into a form of cultural memory that empowers herself as well as other women from her community. Kingston’s portrayal of Fa Mu Lan is an interesting exercise in transculturisation: the author combines elements from her native myth and folklore with her own interpretations and personal experiences to explore themes of heroism, resilience, and the struggle against oppression. The chant of Fa Mu Lan blends with different tales of swordswomen from her mother’s talk-stories as well as from the movies she watched “at the Confucius Church,” as well as the narrator’s own dreams, and forms a hybrid narrative that serves as a source of strength for the author as well as other women (24). In her dreams, the narrator becomes one with the woman warrior. Through this merging of her narrative persona with that of Mu Lan, Kingston explores the complexities of her cultural identity. The story of Fa Mu Lan represents a link to her cultural roots and her heritage, while the author’s persona reflects her contemporary American identity. By combining these identities in her dreams, Kingston engages with the questions of belonging, assimilation, and cultural negotiations. Further, Fa Mu Lan’s qualities of strength, courage, resilience, and defiance against oppression present the author with a universal symbol of

empowerment that she could look up to amidst the overwhelming sexism as well as racism that pervaded both her Chinese and American social circles. As a woman who disguises herself as a man to fight and win a war, Fa Mu Lan offers Kingston a prototype to model her struggles against traditional gender roles practised in her family and community. While her family expects her to become a model daughter and wife, the narrator takes inspiration from the woman warrior to fight against the expectations of her patriarchal community. She challenges gender norms both at home and at college in "Berkeley in the Sixties," where she "marched to change the world" (57). She explores various strategies in her fight against sexism and racism, ultimately discovering a common ground with the female warrior: the power of words. Through her words, Kingston taps into the collective memory of her ethnic community and unearths the inspiring figure of Mu Lan, reinterpreting and retranslating the story to better understand her position and identity within Chinese America. By invoking the spirit of Fa Mu Lan through her writing, Kingston discovers a powerful, alternative model of femininity in contrast with the submissive female roles usually prescribed by traditional Chinese culture. For Kingston, this piece of Chinese cultural memory therefore doubles as a tool to engage with the tenets of Western feminism, thereby involving a unique transcultural negotiation of Chinese and American values by emphasising the importance of both the traditional culture and modern socio-political transformations.

In her next two chapters, titled "Shaman" and "At the Western Palace," Kingston again taps into her own immediate family's herstory by narrating the stories of her mother, Brave Orchid and her maternal aunt, Moon Orchid,

respectively. In “Shaman,” as Brave Orchid’s personal experiences as a certified midwife, healer, exorcist, and monster hunter in China are unveiled, the ancestral homeland comes alive and tangible in the narrator’s imagination, even though she had never been there:

> Once in a long while, four times so far for me, my mother brings out the metal tube that holds her medical diploma. On the tube are gold circles crossed with seven red lines each—“joy” ideographs in abstract. There are also little flowers that look like gears for a gold machine. According to the scraps of labels with Chinese and American addresses, stamps, and postmarks, the family airmailed the can from Hong Kong in 1950. It got crushed in the middle, and whoever tried to peel the labels off stopped because the red and gold paint came off too, leaving silver scratches that rust. Somebody tried to prise the end off before discovering that the tube pulls apart. When I open it, the smell of China flies out, a thousand-year-old bat flying heavy-headed out of the Chinese caverns where bats are as white as dust, a smell that comes from long ago, far back in the brain. Crates from Canton, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan have that smell too, only stronger because they have more recently come from the Chinese. (67)

Kingston uses seemingly ordinary objects like the metal tube holding Brave Orchid’s medical diploma and old photographs as powerful portals to the past. The damaged tube, with its peeled labels and faded paint, symbolises the hardships of immigration while preserving the vestiges of the fascinating past life that Brave Orchid led in China. The evocative “smell of China” transcends the physical realm,

transforming into a potent memory trigger. The author further relies heavily on her mother's talk-stories and inherited memories to paint a vivid picture of her mother's past life. In China, her mother is revealed to have been a courageous woman who endeavoured to move away from her village alone to get a diploma in midwifery at the To Keung School of Midwifery in Canton and returned to the village as an accomplished healer. The narrative takes a fantastical turn as it portrays Brave Orchid as a woman who not only practiced medicine but also fought ghosts and formidable monsters. At the medical school, Brave Orchid successfully 'exorcises' a ghost that had frightened the other girls by gathering them together and urging them to confront it:

> "Act unafraid. Ghost chasers have to be brave. If the ghost comes after you, though I would not expect an attack during the day, spit at it. Scorn it. The hero in a ghost story laughs a nimble laugh, his life so full it splatters red and gold on all the creatures around him" (88).

Brave Orchid also attempts to rescue "the village crazy lady" who was accused of being a Japanese spy, from being stoned to death (112-3). Brave Orchid's eventful personal herstory in China stands in stark contrast with her harsh and limited life in America, where she is confined within their home and laundry shop. Kingston infuses her mother's past with heroic and supernatural details like ghosts and monsters in an attempt to reconcile her complex relationship with her Chinese immigrant mother and her unknown past in the ancestral homeland. These magical elements serve as a bridge between the mother's cultural heritage and the daughter's American upbringing. It is notable that the narrator's version of her mother's past

may not always be objective; it is probably filtered through the lens of her childhood imagination and fear. Moreover, the ghosts and monsters in the narrative can be interpreted as symbolic representations of Brave Orchid's own traumas and anxieties regarding her husband, who was away in distant America, and her grief over her deceased young children. These elements also blur the boundaries between reality and memory, highlighting the subjective and fragmented nature of memory, particularly in the context of migration and cultural displacement. The talk-stories and fragmented memories, with their blending of the fantastical and the real, allow the Brave Orchid, Chinese immigrant mother and Maxine, the American daughter to create a shared cultural identity, even though it is based on a mixture of memory, myth, and imagination.

The protagonist of the section titled "At the Western Palace" is Kingston's maternal aunt Moon Orchid, the younger sister of Brave Orchid, whose husband had left her behind in Hong Kong and remarried in America. Brave Orchid sends for her sister so that she can confront her estranged husband and take her rightful place as his wife. Moon Orchid seems hesitant and passive, lacking the assertiveness to face her husband, in contrast to her elder sister's bold nature. This section highlights Moon Orchid's struggle to adapt and find her place in the new environment, and also delves into the complexities of family relationships, especially between the two sisters, as they reacquaint with each other after thirty years of separation. The character of Moon Orchid becomes a vessel through which Kingston explores the relationship of the domestic experiences of women with the themes of cultural displacement and identity. Moon Orchid's journey from Hong Kong to America is

not merely a physical transition but represents an extreme transformation in cultural and psychological terms. Brave Orchid, with her bold and assertive demeanour, contrasts greatly with her quiet and passive sister, reflecting two different kinds of responses to cultural dislocation. Brave Orchid utilises storytelling as a method to empower her sister and encourage her to confront her estranged husband, citing examples from their family history as well as mythology. Brave Orchid employs storytelling as a tool to strengthen and motivate her sister to face her estranged husband, drawing examples from both their family's past and mythology. Their brother had deserted his first wife and remarried in Singapore, but their "First Sister-in-Law" travelled to Singapore and successfully reclaimed her husband (153). Moon Orchid believes that she has no claim over her husband anymore, as he now has a new family, but Brave Orchid compels her to acknowledge that she was the rightful wife and encourages her to reclaim her position. Brave Orchid narrates the mythical story of the emperor with four wives, each representing a cardinal direction:

> "A long time ago," began Brave Orchid, "the emperors had four wives, one at each point of the compass, and they lived in four palaces. The Empress of the West would connive for power, but the Empress of the East was good and kind and full of light. You are the Empress of the East, and the Empress of the West has imprisoned the Earth's Emperor in the Western Palace. And you, the good Empress of the East, come out of the dawn to invade her land and free the Emperor. You must break the strong spell she has cast on him that has lost him the East." (Kingston 169)

This allegorical tale seeks to empower Moon Orchid by portraying a strong, rightful wife reclaiming her place from a usurper. By positioning Moon Orchid as the "good Empress of the East" and the second wife as the "scheming Empress of the West," Brave Orchid creates a clear parallel to her sister's situation, empowering her by identifying her with the rightful authority figure in the story. Brave Orchid's call to action "to free the Emperor" by breaking "the strong spell" the second wife had cast on him positions Moon Orchid as the heroine of her own story, urging her to take control and confront her husband. Through her compelling talk-story about the Emperor's wives, Brave Orchid offers Moon Orchid not simply a story but a blueprint for action. By drawing parallels to the herstories of their sisters-in-law and the Empress of the East, Brave Orchid attempts to equip her sister with the strength and motivation she needs to confront her husband and reclaim her rightful place. However, it is to be noted that even with Brave Orchid's encouragement, Moon Orchid struggles with the confrontation. This shows that storytelling, despite being a powerful tool to convey cultural and emotional meanings, has its limitations as a solution to complex social and emotional issues. Moon Orchid suffers from a fragile mental state due to her husband's abandonment. Moreover, physical relocation to America does not remove the deep-rooted cultural expectations of femininity and submissiveness that she holds, making assertive action difficult for her. While stories may inspire and empower, they may not fully capture the complexities of real-life situations. Moon Orchid's experiences of immigration and life in America are characterised by profound cultural dislocation, disillusionment, and a gradual descent into mental illness. She grapples with the stark differences between her life in Hong Kong and the realities of America, her struggles aggravated by language

barriers, unfamiliar customs, and social isolation. The encounter with her husband and his refusal to accept her has a devastating impact on her, accelerating her descent into mental illness. Moon Orchid loses a fundamental component of her identity, her role as a worthy wife, as a result of her husband rejecting and questioning her value: “Look at her. She’d never fit into an American household. I have important American guests who come inside my house to eat… You can’t talk to them. You can barely talk to me” (181). Having her sense of self-worth destroyed, the rejection and the following relocation to her daughter’s house exacerbate Moon Orchid’s existing anxieties. The unfamiliar surroundings and lack of control over her fate further degrade her mental state. Her anxieties are manifested in the form of a persecution complex. She develops a story about being hunted by “Mexican ghosts,” highlighting her distorted perception of her surroundings (183). The paranoia she develops, fearing persecution by Mexicans, reflects her disconnect from reality and her inability to cope with the cultural shift. Her final move to the mental asylum signifies a complete erosion of her memories and sense of self. She is stripped of any agency and control over her life. However, ironically, the asylum becomes a space where Moon Orchid finds a semblance of peace and belonging. Here, she engages in creating an alternate reality for herself, where she sees the other patients as her daughters. This constructed reality becomes a coping mechanism for her to deal with her damaged sense of self. By telling the story of her maternal aunt’s harrowing experiences of immigration, Kingston exposes the harsh realities of cultural displacement and the limitations of the American Dream for some immigrants. In her homeland, though abandoned by her husband, Moon Orchid still possessed some social standing and identity as a wife and mother. However,

immigration to America strips her of these roles, leading her to feel powerless and insignificant. While America is portrayed as a land of opportunity and prosperity, for women immigrants like Moon Orchid, it often becomes a place of unfulfilled dreams and broken promises. Moon Orchid's loss of agency and subsequent mental breakdown serve as a stark reminder of the psychological toll that cultural displacement can take on immigrants. By portraying Moon Orchid's tragic story, Kingston forces her readers to confront the human cost of displacement and the importance of acknowledging the complex realities of assimilation.

Kingston's final chapter, titled "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," returns to the first-person narrative style of the initial chapters and forms a fitting conclusion for the themes of identity and cultural negotiation, voice and silence, feminism and gender roles, and transcultural memory and heritage discussed in the preceding chapters. The narrator here entwines her own personal memories with those of her mother and bits of stories and myths from Chinese cultural memory to make a complicated narrative that aptly portrays her transcultural subjectivity as a Chinese American individual. She refers to herself as "an outlaw knot-maker," much like the traditional knot-makers of ancient China, who were hired by the nobles to make complicated knots (194). This is a metaphorical way of describing her unique role as a storyteller who complicatedly weaves together various narratives from personal and cultural memory, myths, traditions, and histories. As explored in her first chapter about No Name Woman, one of the central themes of this memoir is the struggle for finding one's voice within a traditional patriarchal culture that imposes silence, especially on women. In the final chapter, Kingston relaunches this discussion in the light of her own personal memories, such as that of her mother

cutting the “fraenum” of her tongue as a baby, her struggle with voice and silence at school, and her bullying of a silent Chinese girl at school. The act of her mother “cutting” her tongue suggests an intervention aimed at ensuring that the narrator “would not be tongue-tied” and would be able to navigate fluently between languages and cultures (195). The act symbolises the painful processes often required by immigrants and their descendants to fit into or resist cultural moulds. The narrator is confused by this supposed frenotomy because she cannot be certain that it was actually done on her, as she only remembers her mother telling her about it, not her mother performing it. Despite constant examination of her tongue, she could never find any evidence of it having been cut, so she had to take her mother’s words as the only proof of it having happened.

> I used to curl up my tongue in front of the mirror and tauten my frenum into a white line, itself as thin as a razor blade. I saw no scars in my mouth. I thought perhaps I had had two fraena, and she had cut one. I made other children open their mouths so I could compare theirs to mine. I saw perfect pink membranes stretching into precise edges that looked easy enough to cut. Sometimes I felt very proud that my mother committed such a powerful act upon me. At other times I was terrified—the first thing my mother did when she saw me was to cut my tongue. (194)

The uncertainty surrounding this childhood incident reflects the subjective and sometimes unreliable nature of memory itself. The ambiguity regarding the frenotomy creates a space for the narrator to intertwine reality and imagination to create her own version of the memory, mixed with personal interpretations. While

her mother claimed to have cut her tongue to make the narrator talk more, the patriarchal culture in which she grew up causes the opposite effect: the culture of silence ingrained in her upbringing causes the narrator to doubt whether her mother actually intended to silence her rather than help her talk more. Despite its uncertainty, the memory has a strong emotional impact on the narrator, causing her to constantly focus on her tongue and fuelling the insecurities she has about her own voice and self-expression. Her ongoing struggles to strike a balance between the conflicting cultural expectations of speaking up in American culture and silence in Chinese culture amplify these insecurities. The narrator's memory of her bullying another quiet Chinese girl at school, trying to get her to talk, exposes her own internalised prejudices and insecurities regarding speech and her assertion of her voice. With her narration of this act, the narrator confronts her own complicity in perpetuating the culture of silence she herself has struggled against. This particular memory thus serves as a critical point of self-awareness for the narrator, becoming an emotionally charged reminder of the complex culture of silence that permeated the Chinese immigrant community she was a part of. The immigrant Chinese people had to keep their past secrets and memories hidden and buried in their American lives so that they would not be denied citizenship and deported back to China. The children of immigrants, like the narrator herself, had to be extremely careful while speaking to other Americans at school, lest they blurt out the secrets their families were desperate to hide. This early training in silence and the cultural necessity of keeping secrets hamper the communication skills of Chinese American children like Kingston and the silent girl, creating large gaps of understanding even between family members. Combined with the traditional Confucian emphasis on restraint and

respect towards elders and the generational and cultural gap between immigrant parents and their American-born children, the chasm of verbal communication grows so much so that the narrator could barely communicate her mind to her own mother—she "had grown inside [her] a list of over two hundred things that [she] had to tell [her] mother so that [her mother] would know the true things about [her]..." (234). In this context of stifled communication between individuals, storytelling emerges as the primary medium through which Kingston can effectively convey her thoughts and emotions to her mother. Her mother's talk-stories serve as a vital communicative bridge between generations in this environment, illustrating the communicative and cultural nature of these stories as explained earlier. A blend of personal anecdotes, family lore, and mythology, Kingston uses her mother's talk-stories in her own narrative as a means of exploring and asserting her identity as a Chinese American woman. This is illustrated accurately in her retelling of the story of Ts'ai Yen, a legendary Chinese poet who was abducted and kept captive for many years by barbarians and later returned to her native Han community bearing songs and stories from her life in exile. Kingston takes the story that her mother told her about her maternal grandmother and other women in her family who went to watch a play and were ambushed by bandits at the theatre and combines it with the tale of "Ts'ai Yen, a poetess born in AD 175," "the daughter of Ts'ai Yung, the scholar famous for his library." Ts'ai Yen was captured by the chieftain of a barbarian tribe, living with him for twelve years and bearing him two children who did not speak Chinese, only "imitating her with senseless singsong words." During her stay with the barbarians, Ts'ai Yen sang songs in her mother tongue, matching the barbarian flute tunes. Even though they did not understand the words, the barbarians could

sense the sadness and anger she felt. Her songs, which "her children eventually sang along," also seemed to contain some "barbarian phrases about forever wandering." After years of captivity, when she returned to her native land, she "brought her songs back from the savage lands." One of the songs was 'Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,' which was passed down through generations by Chinese people singing to their own instruments. The author remarks that the song "translated well," in spite of the language barrier (247-9). Here, the narrator's personal experiences negotiating between two distinct cultures are mirrored in Ts'ai Yen's abduction and captivity. The physical as well as cultural journey of the legendary poetess draws parallels to Kingston's own journey of self-discovery within a Chinese American environment. Ts'ai Yen's songs in the Chinese language, which matched musically with the barbarian instruments and also contained barbarian words, serve as powerful illustrations of the narrator's own negotiation of her transcultural subjectivity. Despite spending twelve years in captivity, away from her native village, Ts'ai Yen manages to engage with and merge the distinct cultures of her captors and her own, creating a unique new blended culture that she transmits back to her own people. This kind of transcultural engagement is also seen in Kingston's own writing, as she navigates her dual heritage, blending stories and experiences from both cultures, thereby attempting to reconcile her Chinese roots with her American upbringing. Kingston's integration of Ts'ai Yen's story into her own narrative reflects her deep respect for her Chinese ancestry and simultaneously emphasises the value of storytelling in the formation of one's identity. Her mother's living and breathing talk-stories, which adapt and evolve with each retelling, act as a link between the narrator and her community. While she has no direct experience of

her ancestral homeland and its culture, her mother's talk-stories prove to be the crucial link that binds the American-born narrator to her Chinese heritage.

Astrid Erll, the pioneering theorist of memory studies, acknowledges the transcultural nature of memory, which transcends and crosses the nation-culture boundaries that are traditionally associated with it (*Memory in Culture* 61–66). This concept of transcultural memory, which explains how memories and cultural narratives travel through national and cultural boundaries, is vividly illustrated by Kingston's eloquent recounting of her mother's talk-stories ("Transcultural Memory"). By merging the traditional Chinese talk-story with the Western narrative form of the autobiography, the author creates a hybrid genre that reflects her complex transcultural identity as a Chinese American. Through her act of writing and narrating individual as well as collective family memories, Kingston reinterprets and reimagines her native Chinese myths and family stories through the lens of her modern American experiences and upbringing. This reimagination enables the author to engage herself in a profound dialogue with her ancestral past, as well as her contemporary realities. By this literary adaptation of cultural memories through writing, Kingston develops new transcultural memory spaces, where readers from various cultural backgrounds become able to interact with the Chinese American experience through the sharing, contestation, and reshaping of memories and cultural nuances. Such an adaptation of cultural memory allows traditional cultural narratives to transform, acquiring new meanings and significance in different cultural contexts. This transformation of Chinese cultural and familial narratives in America through the stories of authors like Kingston thus, in a way, aids in the

preservation of these traditional narratives, by helping them stay relevant in the new sociocultural contexts and realities.

The formation of transcultural memory spaces through narration is further observed in Amy Tan's *Where the Past Begins: A Writer's Memoir* (2017). Tan is renowned as one of the most prolific Chinese American authors of contemporary times for her bestselling novels, including *The Joy Luck Club, The Kitchen God's Wife, The Bone Setter's Daughter,* and *The Valley of Amazement.* In *Where the Past Begins,* Amy Tan explores her life as a writer, investigating her own creative process, including the facts and memories that have inspired her fiction, as well as the personal and familial histories that have influenced her narrative voice. She also attempts to better understand her own complex cultural identity by confronting her own traumatic childhood memories and emotional experiences. Thereby, Tan takes her readers on a journey through her personal and collective memory, imagination, and truth. The author reveals the fluid and evolving character of memory and demonstrates how the acts of remembering and writing constantly reshape and reconstitute personal and collective narratives. Influenced by emotional experiences, cultural contexts, and the power of storytelling, memory, for Tan, becomes a site of self-discovery and a means of fostering a transcultural identity that accepts complexity and contradiction.

Conceived as a collection of letters to her editor, "journal entries, deeply personal reflections on her traumatic childhood and harrowing family history, and candid passages about her creative struggles and self-doubt," the memoir explores Tan's navigation of her mother's traumatic past, familial secrets, and her evolution

as a bestselling author, particularly focussing on the creative process of her latest novel, *The Valley of Amazement* (Alter). Like Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, *Where the Past Begins* also follows a non-linear structure, defying a strict chronological order. It is essentially a diverse collection of personal essays, letters, journal entries, short poems, and pictures, fashioning a fragmented yet cohesive narration. The narrative moves back and forth across time, blending personal tales, family history and Tan's reflections on her writing process. Tan's memories are presented as non-linear and disjointed, triggered by sensory experiences, emotions, and material artefacts connected with her past. This fragmented method is a reflection of how memory itself operates, being triggered by material objects, sensory experiences, emotions, or even seemingly unrelated events. It offers a profound account of the author's childhood experiences and the inevitable connection between fiction and "emotional memory" (Tan *Where the Past Begins* 33). Tan examines her family memorabilia, letters, photographs, personal artefacts, and documents like her parents' student visas or ESL essays that reveal secrets and truths from her family history, reconfiguring memories of her parents, thereby also influencing her own identity. This narrative approach captures the associative and complicated nature of memory and the way it influences one's sense of self and place in the world. Tan acts like both a historian and an archaeologist while she closely examines her own personal as well as family memories. Just like a seasoned historian, she sifts through the "evidence" of her family's past, including the memorabilia, letters, and photographs, attempting to piece together a coherent narrative (1). In doing so, Tan also theoretically reflects on the nature of memory itself and examines how it has influenced her writings. She reveals the lack of

control that individuals possess over their memory, which "gives you no choice over which moments you can erase, and it is annoyingly persistent in retaining the most painful ones." Memory, Tan writes, "is extraordinarily faithful in recording the most hideous details, and it will recall them for you in the future with moments that are even only vaguely similar" (2). She approaches her memories critically, much like how a historian scrutinises historical documents. She also acknowledges the potential gaps and inconsistencies in her recollections, stating that during the process of writing this memoir, she was conscious that much of what she thinks she remembers "is inaccurate, guessed at, or biased by experiences that came later" (3). Tan realises that even photographs, which are usually considered accurate depictions of particular moments or events, can be deceptive. They can be subjective and manipulated to project a certain perspective or narrative. It is the photographer's prerogative to choose what to include and exclude from the frame:

> To get the best shot, the messiness is shoved to the side, the weedy yard is out of the shot. The images are also missing context: the reason why some are missing, what happened before and after, who likes or dislikes whom if anyone is unhappy being there. When they heard "cheese," they uniformly stared at the camera's mechanical eye, and put on the happy mask, leaving viewer fifty years later to assume everyone had a grand time. (*Where the Past Begins* 3)

In this way, the photograph itself becomes a performance, as its subjects consciously or unconsciously pose or perform in front of the lens. Therefore, even a photograph may not show the full reality of the moment, including the emotions, relationships,

and contexts that elude the image. Thus, Tan learns to always question what she sees and explore what may not be seen. She therefore uses the photographs only "to trigger a complement of emotional memories" (3).

For the author, the concept of emotional memory carries much weight in the formation of metaphors in her writing, thus greatly influencing her creative output. Emotional memories are more than simple factual recollections; they are greatly intertwined with emotions and personal experiences. These memories are subjective and fragmented in nature and are deeply connected to sensory perceptions. Tan's concept of emotional memory and its connection to her writing may be illustrated by looking at how her perception of gardenia flowers changed after the deaths of her brother and father. Initially, Tan recounts that she considered gardenias, with their "heavy perfume, creamy white petals, and thick glossy leaves," as the "best flower" and coveted them as a symbol of beauty and social status for events like "high school proms" (28). However, because they were among the flowers that friends and family sent as condolence flowers after the passing of Tan's brother and father, their appeal dramatically decreased. For her, the once pleasant smell becomes "nauseating" as their "beauty and scent belied their purpose as the messenger of grief" (28). This affects her so profoundly that, in her writer's imagination, the gardenia transforms from a symbol of beauty and joy to one of sorrow and death. This then turns into an "autobiographical metaphor" in her short story "Gardenias," in which she "used the imagery of a room choked full of gardenias" to convey the story of a woman who was struggling to come to terms with the sudden death of her husband (27-28). This demonstrates the fluid and subjective nature of emotional

memory, which often deals with the feelings attached to a particular memory, rather than the actual minute details of it. Emotional memory is instrumental in shaping the writer's understanding of the world; it connects her to her past and also informs and influences both her present and future.

The concept of emotional memory is also important in the sense that it provides Tan's readers with a profound look into the impact of traumatic childhood experiences on her memory and identity. She experiences several traumatic events, including the deaths of her brother Peter and her father within six months of each other, as well as the emotional trauma she endures due to the suicidal tendencies of her mother. Tan recounts an incident in her early years as a fiction writer when she attended a workshop titled "Finding the Story." During a writing exercise, Tan remembers an incident when her mother threatened to kill her and her younger brother John:

> She invoked their names, Daddy and Peter, and she'd threatened before to kill herself to be with them. Now she wants to take us all. She might actually mean to do what she says this time. And then I'm instantly angry. It never stops—her suicide threats, now her threats to kill me. She can't take it anymore and I can't either. I'm shouting, "Go ahead. Do it. Do it right now." And I realize too late I might actually die. (*Where the Past Begins* 120)

This memory and the narration of it cause an extreme emotional outburst from the author as she reflects on the years of emotional abuse she suffered due to her mother's instability and suicidal tendency, which created a constant atmosphere of

fear and uncertainty in the household. Tan, who feels trapped in a vicious cycle of turmoil, expresses her anger and frustration towards her mother. At the same time, in writing this memoir, Tan also remains sympathetic towards her mother as she examines the reasons for her mother's mental illness and suicidal tendency. At the age of nine, Amy Tan's mother, Daisy, had witnessed her mother die of an opium overdose and had developed suicidal thoughts ever since (121). With this memory, Tan explores the impact of intergenerational trauma and how the emotional scars of her mother's past are manifested in her behaviour towards Tan, resulting in a complex and strained mother-daughter relationship. As she reflects on the real reason for her mother's abnormal behaviour, Tan becomes more understanding of her mother, and she acknowledges the inevitability of accepting one's family as they are:

> My mother was my mother. There were many times in childhood when I wished that were not so. But when I was grown, she was inextricably part of the way I thought and observed, and to wish she were not my mother would be like wishing I were a different person. So much of who I am comes from her genetic traits, as well as from the nightmares inculcated by her vivid warnings, and from my own rebellions against her. (122-3)

While it was difficult to endure her mother's "stormy disposition" and "periodic tsunamis," Tan also recognises that these challenges forced her to become resilient and independent, giving her a unique perspective on life (123). Furthermore, it also sparked her imagination and fuelled her creativity as a writer. Tan realises that the deep impact her mother had on the shaping of her identity, mirrors the impact her

grandmother had on the shaping of her mother's identity. Tan thus acknowledges the complexities of familial relationships, particularly the mother-daughter relationship. By exploring how her mother's traumatic past and cultural background have influenced their relationship, she learns to transcend the misunderstandings and conflicts, ultimately coming to a deeper awareness and acceptance. This uncovering of her mother's and grandmother's difficult pasts also allows Tan to connect with her cultural heritage on a more personal level, leading to a greater appreciation for her cultural identity as well as the resilience of her female ancestors.

In a similar manner, Amy Tan dedicates her Chapter Eight to the reconstruction of the fragmented and idealised memories of her father, who died when she was fifteen. Tan's early observations and the limited information she had at her disposal about her parents' early lives led her to believe that her father was a saintly man who was completely devoted to his faith and embodied Christian values (189). However, as she reads his diary, Tan learns about his struggles with faith and his moments of weakness and frustration, which humanises her perception of him. Moving beyond the simplistic and idealised image of her father, she begins to see him as a flawed and complex individual. This nuanced understanding helps the author connect with her father on a deeper level, even after his death. Tan's evolving remembrances about her parents illustrate how memories are not static but undergo a dynamic process of construction and reconstruction. Her initial perceptions of her parents are formed through the inexperienced lens of childhood, influenced by a limited awareness and emotional outlook. However, as she matures, through writing

and reflection, Tan actively engages with her memories, reconfiguring them to gain a more nuanced and complex understanding of her parents and, thereby, of herself.

This evolution of understanding that Tan undergoes in perceiving her own family's history is even more evident in her exploration of her mother's and grandmother's past lives in China. By delving deep into their stories and narrating them evocatively, Tan presents before her American readers a complex set of Chinese women's experiences that are marked by resilience, sacrifice, and strength. Chinese women like her maternal grandmother and mother, who lived through and suffered significant historical and personal upheavals, mostly had their stories erased or overlooked. By centring her writing on her female ancestors, like Kingston, Tan also seeks to rectify the patriarchal fallacy of mainstream history by bringing their herstories to the forefront.

Amy Tan's initial perception of her grandmother was coloured by her mother's accounts, which portray her as a tragic figure who suffered greatly in life and ultimately died "accidentally" by opium overdose (161). In this version, her grandmother had fallen in love with a poor but respectable scholar and defied her family to marry him. After birthing a son and a daughter, she had been widowed and later remarried to a rich man named Du. She died after a few years, leaving Tan's mother an orphan. As Tan grew older, she noticed the inconsistencies in the story her mother had narrated and deduced some gruesome details, which her mother later admitted. Her widowed grandmother perhaps had been captured and raped by the rich man, forced to marry him or remain a concubine to him. Tan's mother revealed that the Du family treated Tan's grandmother "like some kind of prostitute," which

caused her great suffering (163). Tan's mother insisted on telling her these unpleasant stories because she believed her daughter, as a writer, was empowered to "change the past" by telling "the whole world, so they know what [her] mother suffered" (164). For Daisy Tan, the author's mother, narrating her mother's story to her writer daughter also reflects a desire to break free from the constraints of silence and shame that have surrounded her family history. Generations of patriarchal history had hidden and erased the sufferings of women like Tan's grandmother, perpetuating a culture of invisibility for women and their personas. By encouraging her daughter to write about these experiences, Daisy seeks to break the patriarchal culture of erasure and give some validation to her mother's existence in the world. As a perceptive writer, however, Amy Tan realises that her mother Daisy's version of her grandmother's story was perhaps influenced by her own emotional memory and may not reflect the complete truth. Therefore, Tan looks for the "inconsistencies, gaps in information, contradictions, false leads, and changing details" contained in these stories about her grandmother so that the truth can be "teased out" (160). Tan turns into an investigative journalist by uncovering her grandmother's story through scrutinising old family photographs and other documents with a magnifying glass. Combined with historical research into the times when her grandmother lived in Shanghai, her mother Daisy's emotional memories of her, and her own deductions from the scrutiny of old photographs, the author brings these hidden narratives into focus. Tan's encounter with some photographs and documents in the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco and their comparison with the photographs she possessed of her grandmother leads to the shocking possibility that her grandmother might have once been a courtesan in Shanghai. This possible revelation signifies a complex

mix of emotions for Amy Tan: “To even consider that [her grandmother might have been a courtesan] felt blasphemous to her memory” (169). The possibility challenges the image of her grandmother that had been passed down through family stories, as an “old-fashioned, traditional, and quiet, a woman of few words, a woman who was widowed early, and who would have remained a chaste widow had she not been raped and forced to become a concubine” (169). It forces Tan to consider and confront the complexities and contradictions within her family history. Tan delves deeper into the details of the places and times of her grandmother’s life to understand the societal context and personal circumstances that may have resulted in her grandmother living such a life. Tan also considers the possibility that, contrary to the photographic evidence, her grandmother might not have been a courtesan at all, and her clothes in the photographs may only have been a costume she dared to don despite their moral implications in her society. This would mean that Tan’s grandmother was a strong-willed woman who believed in breaking restrictive traditions and going against societal conventions:

> I want to believe that is the reason the photos exist. She was not old-fashioned. She was a daring girl. I want to believe I am like her, that the past is connected to the present, a continuous evolution of who we become, which can even manifest as a penchant for outrageous costumes. My mother saw her mother in me, and no wonder. We are alike in so many ways. We have strong opinions. We can’t tolerate insults. And look at what we did for love. We did not give up because of disapproval. We became more determined. (175)

For Tan, discovering details about her grandmother's life is not simply about uncovering a hidden truth but also about understanding the complexities of women's lives in patriarchal societies. The gaps and inconsistencies in her family history inspire the author to keep questioning the narratives that she had been told and attain a more authentic picture of her family's past, particularly from the perspective of her women ancestors. By continuously questioning these traditional narratives, Tan seeks to challenge the stereotypes and reclaim the narratives of women like her grandmother, who have been marginalised or silenced by the male-centric narratives. It also helps Tan to connect with her grandmother on a deeper level while also recognising the difficult choices she may have had to make according to the circumstances of her life. This allows the author to sympathise with her ancestor and understand her sufferings. By narrating these in her memoir as well as by writing fiction *(The Valley of Amazement)* inspired by these stories, Tan encourages the world to recognise and sympathise with the plight of women like her grandmother, who had had to make the best of difficult circumstances in order to survive in a hostile patriarchal environment.

Similarly, Tan also performs a similar exercise with her mother Daisy's past in China, before she immigrated to America. Daisy, who had grown up in the rich Du household after her mother's death, had been previously married to a decorated Chinese air force pilot before marrying Tan's father and moving to the United States. Amy Tan weaves together her mother's personal memories, fragments from her mother's ESL essays, family anecdotes from relatives, and evidence from old photographs to narrate the tale of her mother's abusive first marriage, and about the

daughters from that first marriage, the circumstances of her parents' meeting and love story, and their subsequent elopement and migration to the United States. Tan's fragmented memories and stories about her mother depict a resilient woman who, despite facing numerous hardships, persevered to overcome them and build a better life for herself and her family in America. Her mother's life story and their complex mother-daughter relationship become the crux of much of Amy Tan's fictional writings, including her most famous novels, *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife.* This is in keeping with her mother's insistence that narrating these hidden stories to the world breaks the cycle of silence and shame that surrounds these women. Tan's mother wanted the secrets of her mother's and her own past to be exposed to the world "so that the power of shame could be replaced with outrage" (164). By exploring and narrating her family herstory in this manner, Amy Tan confronts the complexities of memory and truth, and like Kingston did in "No Name Woman," exposes the way in which patriarchal narratives of shame dehumanise women and silence their stories.

Investigating the herstories in her family also has a great transformative effect on the author's own identity and sense of self. As is evident in the narrative, Tan's initial perceptions of her family history were very shallow, idealised, and fragmented. As she matures as a person and writer, her understanding of how dominant narratives are formed grows, and she begins to actively engage with her memories and reimagines them through her introspection and writing. Her deep exploration into the old family memorabilia and comparing these with historical records prompts her to question the established narratives and enables her to develop

a more detailed understanding of her family's past. Understanding the perspectives of her female ancestors who had been marginalised and silenced by the patriarchal culture helps Tan to reclaim their stories and tell them to the world. Through this process of narrative reclamation, the American-born author is able to connect more with her Chinese-born mother and grandmother.

This deepened connection with her family's past also signifies a greater connection and understanding of her own identity and ancestral heritage. Amy Tan embarks on a journey of self-discovery and reflection through her memory lanes, which deepens her perception of the events and experiences that have shaped her identity. Particularly, the exploration of her parents' past, including their experiences in China and their struggles of rebuilding their life in America after immigration, helps the author feel closer than ever to her bicultural heritage. As American-born children, the author and her brothers were largely ignorant of their parents' struggles and even partly resented them for pushing them hard to excel at everything, including studies and music. As children, Tan acknowledges that she and her brother Peter felt "sick and tired of hearing our mother talk about a bunch of unknown sacrifices she made just so we could enjoy music" (85). However, as she matures, the author realises that her parents' struggles were not simply material. Her mother had to

> "give up pride, a lot of it, when she was no longer perceived as an articulate witty woman whose speech and writing were refined. In the United States she could not speak easily to anyone. Her English was poor, and most of the

> Chinese people she met in the United States spoke Cantonese, not Mandarin or Shanghainese." (84)

Her mother, who had lived a life of privilege in China, went from "having a maid, a driver, and a cook…a maid to massage her feet," to working hard as a vocational nurse, "a job that required her to empty bedpans, change soiled sheets, and wash people's bottoms." Daisy Tan also had to make an even more "terrible sacrifice: her daughters, ages four seven, and thirteen. By leaving China, she had no way to retrieve them unless she returned on a one-way ticket and demanded her husband to give her custody" (74, 84). Similarly, her father had to struggle with the crisis of his Christian faith due to guilt about his role in breaking his wife's first marriage, the public scandal that ensued, and her separation from her daughters. He ultimately gives up his enrolment at the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology and enrols in the Berkeley Baptist Divinity School to become a minister (82). This exploration of her parents' past enables Tan to develop a deeper understanding of her cultural identity and a greater appreciation for the sacrifices her parents made. As Tan gains deeper insights into her parents' past struggles, she begins to appreciate the reasons why they always pushed her and her siblings to have more ambition as children. Tan realises that her parents only wanted them to have better odds of success in their American life as children of immigrants. Thus, by investigating her family's past, the author gains great insights into the cultural, social, and historical forces that shaped their lives, and thus consequently influencing her own identity. By engaging in constant dialogue with her family's past, Tan is able to recognise and reconcile the various facets of her own identity,

informed by personal and collective memory, cultural heritage, and family relationships. As a writer, these memories and experiences enrich the author's imagination with emotional memories and autobiographical metaphors in her fiction, as she explains in her meditations on her imagination.

Tan's relationship with her mother, as well as her ancestress's herstories, serve as a major source of inspiration for most of her fictional works, including the widely acclaimed *The Joy Luck Club, The Kitchen God's Wife,* and *The Bonesetter's Daughter.* This exploration also contributes greatly towards the larger discussions about the Chinese American experience and identity. The compelling history of the author's family and ancestors, and her own experiences of growing up as a Chinese American, help the author to develop and share unique perspectives on the nuances of cultural adaptation, identity formation, and the intergenerational dynamics within Chinese American families like her own. The difficult herstories of her foremothers give Tan the courage to portray taboo themes such as mental illness and domestic abuse, which contributes to a nuanced and multifarious portrayal of Chinese American experiences. Due to cultural stigmas and shame, these issues are often silenced and fail to make it to narrative representation. By openly discussing these often-neglected facets of Chinese American lives, Tan provides to her global readers, a more comprehensive outlook on the challenges that immigrants and their descendants encounter routinely in a country like the United States.

Therefore, more than a memoir, *Where the Past Begins* reveals itself as a testament to the power of memory and storytelling in relaying the transcultural experience of diasporic families like that of the author herself. Amy Tan's

exploration of personal and familial memories exposes how the act of storytelling and narration can influence the formation of individual identity as well as develop a transcultural consciousness. Tan undertakes an extensive process of meaning-making by sifting through her family memorabilia, letters, photographs, and other documents, aiming not simply to remember but also to reconfigure her understanding of her family. For her, writing and narrating these memories signifies "the painful recovery of things that are lost" (34). Tan fills in the fissures of memory with imagination, questions established narratives and brings out the rarely exposed voices of the women in her family, thereby enabling a reconstruction of her family's past. Through this, she also fuses together the varied cultural perspectives that come along with her Chinese heritage and American upbringing, resulting in a more nuanced understanding of her family's experiences. Through her writings, Tan combines her mother's stories, personal anecdotes, family lore, and cultural narratives with family memorabilia and historical evidence to create a multivocal narrative that reflects the interaction between individual experiences and cultural heritage. Enhanced by her unique emotional memories and autobiographical metaphors, Tan develops a transcultural perspective that embraces the complexities and contradictions of her Chinese American identity.

The current chapter has explored how the select personal narratives of Chinese American women writers, namely *Fifth Chinese Daughter* by Jade Snow Wong, *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston, and *Where the Past Begins* by Amy Tan, have transcended the conventional genre boundaries of the Western autobiographical tradition by employing new and innovative narrative techniques to

express their complex experiences as Chinese American women. Through their unique forms of storytelling, they have asserted their multiple consciousnesses, as well as their transcultural and gendered subjectivities. Their innovative narrative forms as well as stylistic choices have helped them to explore various complex themes, including personal and cultural memory, familial as well as community history, gender and ethnic identities, and cultural negotiations, thereby contributing to the development of a rich and varied tradition of Chinese American women's writing. Despite the similarities in the themes that they explore, Wong, Kingston, and Tan have each employed distinct narrative styles that are uniquely suited to their own personal experiences and writing styles.

Published in 1950, Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* used a linear narrative in the third person to adequately represent the challenges of cultural negotiations that she experienced while growing up as a Chinese American woman. This narrative technique also has helped her to balance between the cultural expectations and moral propriety of both Chinese and American literary sensibilities of the time. Chronologically progressing through various stages of her life from childhood to adulthood, Wong has focussed on themes like cultural negotiation, gender inequality, and the importance of education and individual achievement within the framework of Chinese and American values. As one of the first major works offering an insight into the life of a Chinese American woman, Wong's memoir, even while adhering to a more conventional form and perspective, is still a pioneering work for its time.

At the same time, her literary successor, Maxine Hong Kingston, has significantly departed from her predecessor's more linear and conventional style of narration in her unconventional memoir, *The Woman Warrior*. She skilfully amalgamates autobiography with myth, history, fantasy, personal anecdotes, facts, and fiction to construct an innovative and hybrid form of creative expression. This fragmented and non-linear narrative presented by Kingston forms a mirror that reflects the transcultural complexities of a Chinese American ethnic female identity. The characteristic use of her mother's "talk stories" reveals how storytelling enables the articulation of the themes of gender and cultural identity from the perspective of a young Chinese American woman. Through this unique and innovative narrative approach, Kingston questions the traditional assumptions and conventions of autobiographical writing and also presents a polyphonic representation of the self, and also reflects the complexities and contradictions associated with navigating one's identity across cultural contact zones.

In her 2017 memoir of artistic expression *Where the Past Begins,* Amy Tan examines introspectively, how memory plays an important part in her storytelling process and self-discovery. Tan's memoir illustrates how memory affects her perception of herself, her family and her writing, providing an intimate and complex look at the power of storytelling. By emphasising on self-reflection and emotional memory, Tan draws attention to the role of memory in identity construction and understanding one's place in the world.

When read together, these three memoirs show the evolution of the multiple and diverse ways in which life stories are narrated by Chinese American women

writers, from focussing on the external events of life to internal memories, from linear to fragmented narrative styles, and from detached, objective recounting of stories to introspective exploration of one's mind and self. These narratives also emerge as a strong testament to the power of storytelling in challenging dominant historical and cultural narratives. They offer a polyphonic and transcultural understanding of the Chinese American migration *herstory* by challenging patriarchal as well as dominant racial stereotypes and providing a space for highlighting the voices of marginalised figures and forgotten women in their stories. By breaking stereotypes, reclaiming marginalised voices, and exploring the complexities of cultural negotiations and identity formations, these narratives present the shaping of a Chinese American identity as a dynamic and ongoing process rather than a monolithic community experience. They explore the liminal contact zones between Chinese and American cultures, providing insights into the ways in which migration and cultural contact reshape family relationships and cultural practices as well as individual subjectivities. With a transcultural perspective, they highlight the continual process of the formation of Chinese American identities by the intersection of various historical, social, and personal factors. More importantly, these personal narratives, which are centred on the mostly ignored experiences of women, play an important role in highlighting women's voices in migration stories. In this manner, authors Wong, Kingston, and Tan use the power of their storytelling as an act of 'herstorying' by bringing out the forgotten stories of their foremothers. They highlight the role played by Chinese American women in the growth of the community, not only in sustaining cultural traditions but also transforming them to suit the new realities of the ever-changing American

sociocultural landscape. By sharing their personal stories and offering diverse perspectives on Chinese American ethnic experiences, these authors contribute to a nuanced and inclusive portrayal of the community's history, challenging established narratives and providing an enriched understanding of the multifarious nature of migration, identity, and belonging.

Chapter Two

Bilingual Borders: Language Anxieties and Choices in the Contact Zone

Language has often been defined as a human system of communication that consists of systems of speech and writing used by people generally belonging to a given geographical area or country. Over the years, experts have also recognised languages as the main carriers of thought, memory, culture, and identity. As discussed in the previous chapter, memory plays an instrumental role in shaping and maintaining the cultural identity of ethnic communities within a multicultural environment. In this case, language also acts as the repository that preserves and transmits cultural memory through generations. While American linguist-anthropologist Edward Sapir has challenged the notion that language is intrinsically related to race and culture, he also acknowledges that it intimately interacts with and shapes culture in many ways. According to Sapir, language thus shares a complex connection with culture—while the former may not be essentially a product of the latter, it certainly shapes the way tradition is disseminated and identities are defined in specific cultural contexts. In other words, language may be considered an active force in shaping cultural understandings and communal belongings. Similarly, language is also not intrinsically related to a particular geographical area, although many languages are traditionally associated with specific countries or national identities. The relationship of a language with a particular country or geographical

area can be disrupted because of the “accidents of history” (222). Historical events such as wars, migrations, colonisation, or political changes can result in languages being transferred from one place on the globe to another. This implies that language is ultimately a dynamic entity that evolves, travels, and transforms itself unconstrained by geographical or cultural boundaries. Klaus P. Hansen, in defining culture using a “difference-based” approach, considers it both a function of language and history rather than simply being dependent on geographical borders (qtd. in Hauser and Banse). Language may thus be understood as existing and functioning in cultural spaces rather than geographical ones.

Throughout history, waves of human migrations, travel, trade, and advanced communication technologies have time and again shifted the geographical spatiality of languages and cultures. Socio-historical processes like migrations, colonisation, decolonisation, and globalisation have transformed human demographics. People hailing from various geographical areas and cultures have increasingly come into contact and engaged with each other's cultures and ways of life. As such, languages have also transcended the geographical areas and cultural groups that they were primarily associated with. As global trade, migrations, transnational travel, and communication networks proliferated even more, many parts of the world have become home to multilingual societies, where speakers of different national and vernacular languages as well as regional dialects inevitably come into contact and actively engage with each other.

Modern linguistic theories, with their homogenising emphasis on native speech communities, are ill-equipped to study how language acts in these

multilingual spaces. It is with this consideration that Mary Louise Pratt has advanced the notion of a "linguistics of contact" beyond the homogeneous speech communities that modern linguistics has been centred on. In her article titled "Linguistic Utopias," Pratt problematises modern linguistics' idea of the 'speech community' as a "utopian project that postulates unified, idealised social worlds" ("Linguistic Utopias" 58). According to her, a "linguistics of contact" would place

> at its centre the operation of language *across* lines of social differentiation, a linguistics that focused on modes and zones of contact between dominant and dominated groups, between persons of different and multiple identities, speakers of different languages, that focused on how such speakers constitute each other relationally and in difference, how they enact differences in language (60).

In terms of literary criticism, Pratt suggests that a "linguistics of contact" perspective may be a useful vantage point to look at postcolonial and transnational literatures that experiment with newer forms of writing ("Linguistic Utopias" 63–64). In an increasingly transnational and transcultural world, such an approach would shed some light on the unequal and dynamic power relations that inform language use in contact zones and borderlands where speakers of multiple languages engage with each other. A "linguistics of contact" approach acknowledges language as a site of struggle and negotiation, transcending its primary communicative function. In the context of this study, this perspective allows the researcher to deeply investigate how linguistic identities function at intersections with race, ethnicity, and gender in the works of Chinese American women writers. For instance, in the

context of Chinese American communities, such zones of linguistic contact may be observed in spaces such as Chinatown stores, where languages like Cantonese and Mandarin, as well as various forms of English, come into contact. These spaces offer an opportunity to see how the speakers connect and differentiate themselves through language. Furthermore, in these ethnic communities, the influence of mother tongue, standard English, and code-switching between the two languages varies between generations and highlights the bicultural identity of the individuals. Pratt suggests that a "linguistics of contact" perspective would also help in understanding the dynamics between dominant and dominated groups, which in this case would correspond to the Chinese or bilingual speakers and the majority American speakers of standard English. This perspective therefore helps in exploring how Chinese Americans navigate language use in an English-dominant society, illustrating power relations as negotiated and manifested in everyday communication and literary expression.

By exploring the themes of bilingualism, language anxiety, and language choice in select personal and fictional narratives written by Chinese American women writers, the present chapter looks at how these factors affect the transcultural subjectivities of the protagonists. The texts considered here include the personal narratives of *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston, *Where the Past Begins* by Amy Tan, *Dear Friend, From My Life, I Write to You in Your Life,* and the short story "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers" by Yiyun Li, along with the semi-autobiographical novel *Girl in Translation* by Jean Kwok. These works demonstrate how language is instrumental to cultural identity and how individual languages and

bilingualism influence an individual's worldview, as well as shape their relationships with their community and the larger society.

In a country like America with great external demand for immigration or migration, it is easy to assume that a large group of people is bilingual or multilingual. The term bilingualism refers to the situation where an individual comes to possess two different languages, albeit with varying degrees of proficiency. The US Census Bureau data for 2018 reveal that as many as 67.3 million residents spoke a language other than English at their homes (Zeigler and Camarota). However, ironically, American society has often also been called the "graveyard of immigrant languages," mainly because of the overarching historical prominence of English in all areas of the socio-cultural lives of its residents (Rumbaut and Massey). Pierre Bourdieu develops the concept of "linguistic capital," that is, the mastery of various aspects of language, including vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and style, that is valuable in a particular social context, or a linguistic "market" (qtd. in Thompson 18). In the linguistic market of the United States, where English holds immense symbolic power, immigrants who come possessed with a different, less valued linguistic capital are often faced with feelings of inadequacy and marginalisation. In addition to a person's immigrant status and ethnicity, their linguistic capital also shows their socioeconomic status. Immigrants coming from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to face barriers to accessing resources for English language education than those coming from wealthier backgrounds. Further, linguistic elements such as accent, vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure may reflect their socioeconomic background, which means that "how one speaks reveals

his social class" (Ellis 436). These disparities related to language use and social class, particularly among immigrant communities, reinforce the class-based hierarchies in transcultural contact zones.

Living among an overwhelming majority of English speakers, it is not so much a choice as a necessity for an immigrant in the United States to learn and attain advanced competence in English. However, achieving advanced competence is not without its challenges and anxieties. Language anxiety refers to the "worry and fear-related emotions" felt in a person during the learning or usage of a second language" (MacIntyre and Gregerson). While it is only natural that a first-generation immigrant must face a great level of language anxiety, it must be noted that even their subsequent generations may face some dilemmas about their choice of language in various sociocultural spaces in which they are situated. For new immigrants, language is usually one of the primary markers of cultural difference. It also poses the first major hurdle to finding a sense of belonging in the new sociocultural and linguistic space that they have moved into. Even after years of residency in the United States, many Asian immigrants, including Chinese women, have been documented as facing struggles with their English language acquisition. Many factors have contributed to this. Often Chinese women, constrained by the patriarchal familial system of their traditional families, get very little opportunity to interact with native English speakers, which limits their opportunities of language acquisition. Even for those who did get these opportunities, achieving native-like fluency was almost impossible due to not understanding the native slang and American pop culture references that native speakers frequently used (Noe-

Bustamante, et al.). This often leads to “linguistic disenfranchisement,” that is, the “marginalization of linguistic groups through restrictions on linguistic privileges” (Castañeda Dower et al.) This means that, more than just affecting their sense of identity and self-worth, these linguistic barriers also significantly hamper their ability to access essential services, including education, health, and legal assistance, prevent them from securing dignified employment, as well as delay their integration into American mainstream society. Therefore, in the context of immigrant communities like that of the Chinese, linguistic disenfranchisement involves systemic challenges faced due to language barriers, significantly obstructing their social, economic, and cultural inclusion in American society.

It must be noted that while these problems are more acutely felt by first-generation immigrants, their subsequent generations also often feel the impact of these linguistic anxieties. The tensions of choice between the dominant language and the mother tongue can also affect their sense of self and belongingness to both the dominant society and their ethnic community. While the second generation might have grown up speaking English fluently and relatively more integrated into American society, they may often feel obligated, for cultural reasons, to maintain their mother tongue. This may result in an internal conflict between the emotional need of preserving their ethnic identity and the pragmatic necessity of assimilation into mainstream American society. In this struggle, language becomes a key symbol, with the choice of English feeling like a betrayal of their cultural roots, while favouring their mother tongue may result in the ethnic individual’s alienation from the mainstream culture.

Gloria Anzaldúa, who considers ethnic identity a “twin skin to linguistic identity” emphasises the importance of language choice for an ethnic or borderland individual. Until one can “take pride in” one’s language, one cannot take pride in oneself (81). According to her, language, particularly for an ethnic individual, is therefore not just a tool for communication but profoundly connected to their cultural heritage, personal history, and sense of self. Language mediates between people and the external world; through language, they acquire culture. By functioning as a living archive of their personal and cultural memories, it anchors them to their past heritage. Any language is therefore in possession of multiple emotional, cultural, economic, political, and symbolic values. For immigrants and ethnic minorities, having the opportunity to accept and celebrate their mother tongue may be crucial for affirming their own sense of self. Feelings of shame or suppression of one’s linguistic heritage may result in a diminished sense of self-worth and a fractured identity. At the same time, accepting and taking pride in one’s mother tongue can nurture a healthy relationship with one’s ethnic community and cultivate a more wholesome sense of self. Therefore, language choice by an immigrant or linguistic minority individual in any sociocultural context is reflective of an “act of identity.” Through informed choices of language use, an immigrant or minority person can “maintain and change ethnic group boundaries and personal relationships” and also “construct and define ‘self’ and ‘other’ within a broader political economy and historical context” (W. Li 14–15). Language choice is therefore about strategically navigating the dominant linguistic market, making the most of the linguistic capital that one possesses. Such a meticulous approach to language use involves very personal decision-making as much as practical

necessities. Individuals can affirm their identities, design places of belonging, and negotiate the multilayered sociocultural locations they dwell in by actively managing their linguistic resources. Ultimately, their linguistic choices affect not just their own personal lives but also the changing fabric of the multilingual communities where they are located.

These kinds of strategic linguistic navigations leave the door open for literary and cultural explorations of the choice of language and its acquisition, as well as the necessity for negotiations between the mother tongue and the dominant tongue. The Chinese American authors considered in this study, including Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, Jean Kwok, and Yiyun Li, explore the complex relationship between language, bilingualism, and cultural identity, highlighting how language can shape an individual's worldview and their relationships with the community as well as their identities. Eminent Chinese American writers like Kingston and Amy Tan incorporate Chinese linguistic elements denoting words related to "family, philosophy, music, food, clothes" and other cultural elements, which reflect their bilingual and bicultural worldview (Korovina et al. 15). They exhibit a precarious relationship with English as well as their mother tongues.

This precarity is often manifest in what Evelyn Ch'ien calls "weird English," which "constitutes the new language of literature" and refers to non-standard usages of the English language that arise where multiple languages and cultures intersect (*weird english* 4*)*. This concept implies that "weird English" is also a product of the transcultural contact zone. These transcultural writers employ unconventional modes of English language expression to resist against as well as negotiate with the

dominant language and culture. The techniques employed in their works, be it fiction or autobiography, include the mixing of English with the mother tongue, non-standard spelling and grammar, code-switching, and translanguaging. Such subversive usage of the English language enables these writers to "transcribe their communities and build their identities," thereby developing a "new language of literature" and bringing a "new literary theory into being" (4). By becoming "conscious of language as a practice of their ethnicity," they attempt to rewrite their identities in their own English, as distinct from orthodox English (20). This weird English, as defined by Ch'ien, is not an error reflective of the authors' deficiency of English but rather a strategic act of resistance and literary creation. The weirding of English, achieved by the blending and transcription of their vernaculars into English, becomes a powerful tool for agency, helping these authors challenge and reshape the dominant linguistic idioms.

Ch'ien also highlights Maxine Hong Kingston's use of "Chinglish," the Chinese American "language," which deviates from standard English conventions due to the influence of Chinese language and culture. This deviation, rather than being arbitrary, actually stems from the profound impact of her Chinese upbringing on Kingston's self and expression. She posits Kingston "as a writer in conflict with English," and her writings, including her memoirs *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* and her novel *Tripmaster Monkey,* as "a record of the linguistic history of Chinese American assimilation." By using Chinglish in her works, Kingston forces her readers to take an interest in her ethnic community by making them put "more interpretive effort" into reading them (Ch'ien 105–16). This "interpretive effort"

involves understanding the linguistic nuances, cultural allusions, and hybrid forms that shape Kingston's writing and serves to immerse the reader into the intricacies of the Chinese American experience.

Ch'ien's observations on Kingston's linguistic experiments are evident throughout *The Woman Warrior.* Kingston's diction is often reflective of the blending of Chinese and English languages and cultural nuances, although she may not have directly introduced broken English or mistakes. One notable example of this effect is the author's integration of her mother's talk-stories into the narrative. These stories are replete with linguistic expressions and cultural references that do not properly fit into standard English. For example, in the first chapter of her memoir, as Kingston narrates the tale of her aunt 'No Name Woman,' she incorporates her own personal interpretations and imaginings with direct storytelling. Her language here rapidly shifts and varies to reflect the shifting realities and memories. While she has not directly included actual Chinese words in her writing, the author has employed a hybrid idiom, mixing English with Chinese synctactic structures, cultural referents, and other untranslatable elements. For instance, consider the opening lines of the book:

> '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. (Kingston *The Woman Warrior* 3)

Here, Kingston revoices her mother's oral storytelling in a clear manifestation of "Chinglish." The phrasing here reflects a direct translation of Chinese conversation

and reveals a particular cultural perspective on family lineage and honour that is deeply ingrained in traditional Chinese culture. While the English used is grammatically correct, the linguistic approach deviates from the standard American English usage, illustrating the influence of the native Chinese language and cultural view. In addition, as presented above, Kingston often deliberately avoids the use of standard English punctuation, mimicking the rhythm of her mother's Chinese speech, thereby further departing from the conventions of standard English writing. Furthermore, Kingston incorporates untranslated Chinese terminology and culturally distinct metaphors. The moniker "No Name Woman" itself, used to refer to the author's deceased paternal aunt, embodies "Chinglish" since it is a direct, culturally loaded English translation of an ancient patriarchal Chinese idea of erasure and denial, exhibiting the hybridity of traditional Chinese cultural nuances represented in the English language. This moniker starkly deviates from conventional English naming standards, emphasising the intersection of two contradicting linguistic and cultural worlds. For another instance, the word "Gold Mountain" used often by Kingston is a literal translation of the historical Cantonese expression 'Gam San' used by the nineteenth-century gold-seeking immigrants to refer to California (Kingston 3). Instead of explaining or substituting it with a Western equivalent, Kingston decides to retain its foreignness, allowing it to shift the narrative both culturally and temporally. Similarly, when the villagers attack No Name Woman, they yell insults like "Pig" and "Ghost," which evoke traditional Chinese notions of impurity and paranormal punishment (5). While these words are essentially English nouns, yet the cultural intensity they carry sounds undeniably Chinese.

In the section “White Tigers,” Kingston’s use of “Chinglish” is more than a simple translation; it is a type of narrative embodiment in which English is infused with the rhythm, imagery, and metaphysical conceptions of Chinese philosophy. In this ingenious retelling of the Fa Mu Lan mythology, Kingston blurs the lines between dream and narrative, oral tale and written account, childhood memory and cultural myth, to employ Chinglish as a bilingual texture and epistemic strategy. Notably in this section, Kingston interprets Chinese ideographs and metaphors into English syntax when the narrator describes a bird that beckons her into the mountains as resembling the ideograph for “‘human’,” with “two black wings” (24). This image combines Chinese graphic writing with English narration, using the Chinese writing system not just as a symbol but also as a spiritual marker. Here, the ideograph is enacted rather than explained, allowing English to convey Chinese visual and thought patterns. Another example of “Chinglish” narration is seen in the section where the narrator describes her training session in the mountains in a mythical and didactic tone. The statements like, “Every creature has a hiding skill and a fighting skill a warrior can use,” echo Chinese proverbs and oral storytelling (28). This adds a feeling of timeless knowledge and cultural foundation to Kingston’s personal narrative, connecting it to a larger tradition of Chinese thought and teaching.

These linguistic techniques are not simple stylistic choices but are integral to the shaping of transcultural subjectivities in Kingston’s work. This is how Kingston and other Chinese American writers position themselves as what Jeehyun Lim calls “bilingual brokers.” This terminology is different from the more specific term

"language brokering," which is used by Morales and Hanson to discuss children of immigrants who translate and interpret for their parents and how that affects their well-being (*Bilingual Brokers* 471–72). Lim uses the term "bilingual brokering" "to refer to acts of mediation between different language communities," while also extending to negotiation of identity, social status, and cultural capital. By connecting to conditions such as racialisation, liberalism, and capitalism, under which mediation occurs, Lim examines the complex interplay of language, race, and power with respect to Asian and Latino ethnic communities in the United States (*Bilingual Brokers* 16–17). In her study, Lim says that Kingston's story "reveals a syncretic composition of bilingual personhood" in the way it shows the language-related worries of the ethnic child (*Bilingual Brokers* 30–31). This bilingual personhood is manifested in Kingston's strategic blending of the linguistic conventions associated with autobiography with those of myth and fiction. This strategy serves as a kind of bilingual brokering at the level of the narrative form. For instance, as Myers finds in the article "The Significant Fictivity of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*," Kingston does not just retell the talk-stories of her mother but often merges her own subject position within them, like how she merges her own self with that of Fa Mu Lan in "White Tigers." Her abrupt changes of narrative language from "fictional discourse" to "non-fictional or referential discourse" make her autobiography "not simply a record of her interpretation of her life" but "an enactment of the struggle to construct" (Myers 119–21). This shift between mythic storytelling and personal narrative challenges the idea of a single, authoritative narrative and asserts that there are multiple ways of narrating a story. There is no singularly correct way of articulating experience, particularly for individuals

projecting multi-ethnic and transcultural identities. The abrupt change in language from a third-person narration of the woman warrior's story to a first-person adoption of Mu Lan's subject position acts as a kind of defamiliarisation technique for her readers. Likewise, towards the end of this section, in which the narrator returns from her mythic dreamscape to her mundane American life, the narrative shift exemplifies a novel, blended mode of self-expression. The narrator claims, "[t]he swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them" (Kingston 64). This plea combines the martial terminology of Chinese mythology with the voice of an American-born young woman seeking validation within her own community. The "I" here is both Fa Mu Lan and a second-generation Chinese American girl, with her identity caught between fantasy and reality, Chinese heritage and American sensibility. These linguistic shifts deviate from the readers' expectation of a distant mythical tale, instead immersing them directly in the perspectives of both the mythical Chinese warrior and the young American girl, thereby blurring the distinctions between myth and autobiography. Kingston encourages the reader to rethink the nature of identity, memory, and storytelling by making the mythical feel present and personal, while also emphasising the intimate relationship between her own experience and the traditions of her cultural background.

Kingston deliberately disrupts the traditional narrative expressions of autobiographical writing by interweaving myth, memory, and family history within *The Woman Warrior.* This eclectic blending of genres and narrative styles is not a simple stylistic embellishment but rather consciously unsettles readers' expectations

and passive consumption of the text, forcing them to be involved in a more active interpretation of it. As a reader, one is forced to consider the power of language to construct and deconstruct realities. Kingston's language transcends its communicative function and serves as a force that shapes her memory and identity, often to the extent that her fictional discourse resonates emotionally with the author's self, more intensely, than her autobiographical discourse. For instance, Kingston acknowledges the "great power" possessed by her mother's talk-stories, particularly the chant of the woman warrior Fa Mu Lan, which she internalises so deeply that it profoundly influences her sense of self. The fictional discourse of the legend of Fa Mu Lan resonates with Kingston so strongly that she says, "I would have to grow up a warrior woman," instead of the more realistic and traditional cultural expectation of growing up "a wife and a slave" (Kingston 23). This reflection shows how language, for Kingston, is not simply a tool for communication or narration but a potent force that shapes her identity and reality. The emotional response to the fictional discourse of her mother's talk-stories is thus greater for Kingston than a simple, linear biographical discourse.

In the next section, "Shaman," again, Kingston's linguistic environment features an English idiom processed through the filters of Chinese logic, metaphor, and rhythm. The language demonstrates conventional English narration ingrained with Chinese cultural meaning, constructing a bilingual voice that depicts the transcultural subjectivities of the narrator and her mother. Kingston's description of her mother Brave Orchid's midwifery diploma certificate employs a Chinglish-inflected narration:

> On the tube are gold circles crossed with seven red lines each – ‘joy’ ideographs in abstract. There are also little flowers that look like gears for a gold machine. According to the scraps of labels with Chinese and American addresses, stamps, and postmarks, the family airmailed the can from Hong Kong in 1950. It got crushed in the middle, and whoever tried to peel the labels off stopped because the red and gold paint came off too, leaving silver scratches that rust. Somebody tried to prise the end off before discovering that the tube pulls apart. When I open it, the smell of China flies out, a thousand-year-old bat flying heavy-headed out of the Chinese caverns where bats are as white as dust, a smell that comes from long ago, far back in the brain. Crates from Canton, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan have that smell too, only stronger because they are more recently come from the Chinese. (Kingston 66)

Here, Kingston’s adoption of Chinglish represents an embodied portrayal of the narrator’s bilingual personhood. The English narration incorporates the conceptual and aesthetic sensibilities of Chinese culture. This is achieved through the visual reproduction of ideographs instead of direct translation, the mediation of metaphor through Chinese symbolism and the use of sensory memory as a channel for historical consciousness. Language, here, is not a transparent medium but rather a thick, culturally embedded fabric into which diasporic subjectivity is integrated. The smell that emerges from the tube is not only olfactory but also mnemonic and metaphysical, indicating a return to a historical China that exists only in memory rather than geography. This narration, while in English, conveys the rhythm of

Chineseness. The narrator's distance from this Chineseness in spite of her cultural identification emphasises the conflict at the heart of diasporic identity.

This distance grows more obvious in the narrator's interactions with her mother, whose linguistic world, both in content and cadence, is still based in her Chinese experience. Brave Orchid talks to her daughter with the authority of someone who understands cultural continuity—something that the narrator lacks. Brave Orchid's stories, ideas, and even everyday utterances are influenced by the oral traditions, symbolic thinking, and the moral sense of a Chinese worldview with which she was raised. Her speech, albeit transcribed in English, preserves the dramatic element of storytelling with its meandering and image-rich sentences that recall Chinese rather than Anglo-American speech patterns. On the contrary, her daughter's linguistic identity is more fragmented. Her English, while fluent, bears the weight of silence, displacement, and the attempts to convey experiences that do not entirely belong to either language. Consider the narrator's reaction when they realise that their family's ancestral land in China has been taken over by relatives:

> 'We belong to the planet now, Mama. Does it make sense to you that if we're no longer attached to one piece of land, we belong to the planet? Wherever we happen to be standing, why, that spot belongs to us as much as any other spot.' Can we spend the fare money on furniture and cars? Will American flowers smell good now? (127)

Though rendered in simple language, the narrator's comments imply a significant shift in her understanding of identity. Rather than identifying with a single homeland, the narrator learns to conceive a more expansive, transcultural sense of

self. Her questions about the “fare money” and “American flowers” appear innocent and straightforward, but they reflect deeper anxieties about how to truly belong in the dominant American cultural environment, now that the ancestral land holds no more promise of return. These remarks represent a shift away from the distant hope of homeland return and towards a reorientation towards belonging and value in the host country. The tone employed here is clearly American in its pragmatism; however, the emotional undercurrent is nonetheless influenced by Chinese familial expectations and memories. Kingston presents her bilingual personhood not in terms of her mastery of the two languages but rather as shaped by the friction, negotiation, and reconfiguration between the two cultural and “linguistic skins” that “coexist on her body” (Guo vii).

In the section “At the Western Palace,” Kingston explores linguistic identity as a locus of both cultural continuity and psychological rupture, charting the divergent paths of the sisters Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid in relation to language. Brave Orchid, as explained earlier, speaks with confidence, authority, and moral certainty while maintaining a Chinese linguistic and cultural perspective, despite residing in America. Her vocabulary is structured by parable, metaphor, and command and keeps the rhythm of Chinese oral traditions, even on translation into English. Her words are replete with culturally specific connotations that demonstrate her strong connection to her inherited linguistic identity. However, Moon Orchid, who had been long abandoned by her husband and lived in China for years like a widow, is marked by a linguistic fragility. Her speech is slow, stuttering, and eventually breaks down into silence. Her inability to assert herself verbally in front

of her estranged husband reveals a deeper dislocation, not just from family but also from language itself. During their confrontation with Moon Orchid's husband at his medical office, Brave Orchid's speech is dramatic and deliberate, intended to elicit recognition and guilt in Moon Orchid's husband. Her argument, "You made her live like a widow" is laden with a Confucian morale of duty and honour and is presented in English while mirroring its Chinese ethical foundation (180). Moon Orchid, on the other hand, can barely whisper "What about me?" — a question that is tragically brief and insufficient to express the full gravity of her isolation (180–81). Moon Orchid's breakdown of speech is more than just a failure of her linguistic ability; rather, it is a collapse of her selfhood itself, in response to the prolonged years of trauma and desolation she has had to suffer. The contrast between Brave Orchid's confident, authoritative speech and Moon Orchid's linguistic breakdown highlights the vulnerability of diasporic identity when the individual is removed from a supportive cultural and emotional foundation. Kingston skilfully underscores the disconnects of bilingual experience as she portrays Brave Orchid navigating American life with her strong cultural voice, whereas Moon Orchid suffers owing to a lack of linguistic and emotional stability. Here, linguistic identity is portrayed as shaped by power, memory, and emotional strength, which influence an individual's ability to express oneself across cultural contexts.

In her last chapter titled "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," Kingston presents the most direct and intimate articulation of her bilingual personhood, wherein the narrator's bond with language is shaped by silence, fragmentation, and ambivalence. Here, language becomes a marker of trauma, with the ability to speak

determined by emotional and cultural stability rather than fluency. The narrator's initial muteness in school is portrayed not as a developmental deficiency but as a refusal or inability to speak in a world where neither Chinese nor English feels native. Kingston's admission that, "[a] dumbness – a shame – still cracks [her] voice in two," reflects language as a site of rupture, where speech becomes intertwined with trauma, feelings of inadequacy, and cultural displacement (195). Kingston's use of the metaphor of "tongue-cutting" shows how language is also deeply connected to her physical self. Her mother's assertion that she cut her daughter's tongue to enable it to "move in any language" and "speak languages that are completely different from one another" reflects the immigrants' anxiety due to the pressure to conform to the norms of 'standard' English (195). This anxiety is found pronounced in the narrator's body itself, as she remains preoccupied with her cut tongue, with the sounds of her voice as she speaks Chinese or English, or with the way her "mouth went permanently crooked with effort, turned down on the left side and straight on the right," as she juggles between the two languages (203). Lim argues that Kingston uses the metaphor of the "cut tongue" to problematise and resist the notion of "normal" voice and to expose how in an English-dominant society like America, standard language norms are used to racialise and otherize ethnic peoples ("Cutting the Tongue" 55, 62). In the above instances, Kingston exposes how the pressures to conform to the majority linguistic standards marginalise ethnic minorities, thereby vividly portraying the profound anxieties and alienation felt by an immigrant child growing up in the English-dominant society of America. By describing the narrator's preoccupation with her "cut tongue", Kingston devises a unique embodied narrative

language which brings out the painful embodied effects of assimilation and dominant language acquisition.

The memoir's final legend of Ts'ai Yen functions as both a mythic parallel and a mode of closure. Captured by "barbarians," Ts'ai Yen composes a song in her captivity that, despite being spoken in her mother tongue, her barbarian captors understand emotionally (Kingston 247–48). Her music crosses linguistic boundaries and communicates across cultural barriers. For the narrator, Ts'ai Yen's story represents a transcultural possibility: a voice that, despite its dislocation, carries emotional and cultural resonance across linguistic boundaries. This narrative thus parallels Kingston's own act of writing: while English becomes her chosen medium, her hybrid diction transmits Chinese memory, sensibility, and silences across linguistic borders. From bilingual fragmentation, Kingston here moves towards transcultural articulation. The narrator's voice, initially shaped by silence, shame, and conflict, eventually begins to speak with the awareness of its own multiplicity. Language, in this case, becomes the stage where the complexity of identity is performed. Through her use of Chinglish, sensory metaphors, and layered narrative, she realises a transcultural identity that is formed not through assimilation into the dominant idiom but through the ability to embrace and convey contradictions.

The same bilingual anxieties and personhood that Kingston initially represents in *The Woman Warrior*, engendered by the negotiation between contrasting languages and cultures, forms the core theme in Amy Tan's essay "Mother Tongue," published in 1990. However, deviating from Kingston's embodied, almost dramatic portrayal, Amy Tan shifts her focus inwards as she

reflects on how the different “Englishes” that she “grew up with” influence her sense of self as well as her relationship with her mother. Tan uses personal experiences and insights to reveal the socio-psychological distress caused by the pressure of language conformity on first-generation immigrants like her mother. She reflects profoundly upon her mother’s “broken” English and, even as a celebrated author, endorses it as her own “mother tongue,” thereby augmenting its cultural value.

Tan compares her two distinct registers of English—the perfect English she uses in formal settings to the more intimate form of English she uses at home with her mother—as if they were two different languages. The former, “filled with carefully wrought grammatical phrases” and “burdened... with nominalized forms, past perfect tenses, conditional phrases,” is less expressive to Tan than her mother’s “language,” which is “vivid, direct, full of observation and imagery,” which also has shaped her worldview and sense of self (“Mother Tongue” 7). Tan’s reflections exemplify Bourdieu’s concept of linguistic capital discussed earlier in this chapter. As the accepted dominant language, the standard, grammatically correct form of American English carries a lot of social power by granting its speakers easy access to education, employment, and cultural legitimacy. Tan uses this perfect, standard form of English in academic and formal settings, which lends acceptability and credibility to her words in front of the dominant public, which also constitutes her readers. On the other hand, the non-standard versions of the language spoken by immigrants like Tan’s mother and herself at home carry much less cultural and socioeconomic value. Her mother’s “broken” or “limited” English is often quickly dismissed by society, with people often claiming that they can hardly understand it.

However, for Tan, her mother's English is "perfectly clear, perfectly natural," her "mother tongue" (7). Tan cites the example of a conversation with her mother, where she narrates an episode from her life in China where a gangster with the same family name as her maiden name demands to be adopted by the family:

> Du Yusong having business like fruit stand. Like off the street kind. He is Du like Du Zong -- but not Tsung-ming Island people. The local people call putong, the river east side, he belong to that side local people. That man want to ask Du Zong father take him in like become own family. Du Zong father wasn't look down on him, but didn't take seriously, until that man big like become a mafia. Now important person, very hard to inviting him. Chinese way, came only to show respect, don't stay for dinner. Respect for making big celebration, he shows up. Mean gives lots of respect. Chinese custom. Chinese social life that way. If too important won't have to stay too long. He come to my wedding. I didn't see, I heard it. I gone to boy's side, they have YMCA dinner. Chinese age I was nineteen. ("Mother Tongue" 7)

By quoting the above conversation, Amy Tan illustrates how her mother speaks in a raw, unfiltered manner, which may be judged as broken or fragmented by outsiders. However, for Tan, the logic and cultural nuance inherent in her mother's language are quite easily intelligible, which she translates to her readers in her essay. In contrast to the perfect, standard English used by Tan in formal and academic circles, her mother's English is more suitable and intimately expresses her lived experiences. The conversation introduces us to a portion of her mother's world by blending English with cultural nuances and thus transcending the constraints of

standard English. By publicly reclaiming her mother's "broken" English as her own mother tongue, Tan subverts the idea that linguistic proficiency lies in the ability to conform to the standardised rules of articulation but rather asserts that true linguistic competence lies in the ability to communicate complex, profound emotion. Additionally, Tan's skill at switching between the two different registers of English in professional and personal settings demonstrates her transcultural subjectivity, that is, the negotiation of identity across diverse linguistic and cultural codes. Tan also underscores the idea that individual identity is fluid and continuously reconfigured through engagements with language, memory, and cultural elements.

Tan further explores the engagements of individual identity with language and memory in her deeply introspective memoir *Where the Past Begins,* in which she reveals the long, intimate, and often fragmented episodes of her family history and reflects on their influence on her writing. In the last section of her memoir, which includes the two chapters titled "Language: A Love Story" and "Principles of Linguistics," Tan particularly focuses on her linguistic self-awareness, engaging with not just her personal experiences with language but also her academic interests in linguistics. Her relationship with language manifests as a deeply personal "love story," as she delves into her academic pursuits exploring extinct languages and also her fascination with the almost-extinct language of Manchu, with which she might have ancestral connections (*Where the Past Begins* 315). Tan describes her nightly ritual of reading words in various dead languages of the world, like Aramaic, Lyconian, and Sumerian, thereby reviving them, if only for a few moments. This act of reading the sounds and syllables of a dead language is akin to the revival of

cultural memory, for each word in any language also carries the weight of its emotions and memories of its people, "their spontaneous puns, the bad jokes, and long-winded stories" (*Where the Past Begins* 317). She mourns for the languages that have already been lost as if they were persons who have died and also anticipates "the death knell...for many more," especially in her ancestral land of China, where the official Han language (or Mandarin) threatens to engulf numerous minority tongues and dialects (320). She compares her current intimate relationship with languages to her previous scholarly pursuit, which limited her perception of language to see only "in between, and not within" (321). However, now, as a creative writer, she delves into an exploration of languages beyond their practical communicative functions, considering them embodied repositories of history, memory, emotion, and cultural identity. For instance, as she stumbles upon her previous academic papers, she revisits her studies of the almost-extinct Manchu language, once the language of the court of the Qing empire in her ancestral country but no longer in use after China became a republic in 1912 (Saarela "Manchu Language"). This revisit is particularly significant for Tan because of her newly discovered possibility of a Manchu ancestor. With its "wonderfully imagistic and onomatopoeic lexicon" and carrying "the essence of myth," Tan's connection with the language is laden with affect (*Where the Past Begins* 9–10). The textures "of reduplicative syllables" felt familiar in her mouth, as if she were "becoming reacquainted with a language [she] had once used" (324). The sounds of the words and their meanings evoke the voices and memories of her ancestors, thereby enlivening her long-forgotten past once more and connecting it with her present identity. Tan's feeling of familiarity with the Manchu language is not simple

nostalgia for an almost-extinct language but a realisation of the embodied histories that it carries. By engaging with the Manchu language so personally, the storyteller in her begins to imagine the lives of the Manchu people who lived and died hundreds of years ago. As she reads the words aloud, Tan imagines the triumphs and traumas that have shaped the history of her ancestral homeland. As an American-born individual who speaks English and Chinese, Tan embraces the remote, endangered language of Manchu as part of her identity. Her engagement with the endangered language underscores the countless ancestral memories and narratives that it carries. As a creative writer, Tan is able to imagine these forgotten stories and internalise them as part of her transcultural subjectivity, which is why she declares in the introduction to her memoir that "The Manchu of my book is also the Manchu of my past" (*Where the Past Begins* 10).

In the chapter titled "Principles of Linguistics," Tan's reflections on language move into more personal territory as she elaborates on the various languages spoken by her mother, Daisy Tan, including Shanghainese, Mandarin, and English. Tan reveals the lifelong struggle her mother had with learning English—starting in China and even after living for decades in America, her "English continued to rust and flake over the next fifty years" (*Where the Past Begins* 331). Continuing the discussion in the essay "Mother Tongue," Tan looks closely at her mother's English, which is actually pidgin influenced heavily by Shanghainese and Mandarin. Even after living in America for many decades, Daisy Tan did not attempt to conform her English to standard usages, mostly relying on her daughter to translate her nonstandard speech to monolingual Americans who could understand only

'standard' American English. While taking an ESL class improved her reading and writing skills, Amy Tan acknowledges that her mother "never got rid of the rust in her speech" (331). However, despite her limited English vocabulary and grammar, the author's mother creatively altered her speech to invent unique expressions and idioms like "you unwind my mind," meaning "you twist my words to confuse me." Tan recollects that her mother's sentence structures were also influenced by Chinese, ordering "words according to what my mother wanted to emphasize" (342). These creative changes of English, formed by mixing it with Chinese, are similar to what Rey Chow calls the "xenophone," or "the foreign-sounding speech or tone." According to Chow, these variations can be considered a new "creative domain of languaging" that is formed through "mimicry and adaptation" and is rich in diverse accents and expressions (*Not Like a Native Speaker* 11, 59). It is to be noted that Amy Tan does not see these xenophones as a deficiency, but, on the contrary, she deems them as "surprisingly useful" in conveying her mother's unique personality and experiences (Tan *Where the Past Begins* 342). The modifications of English in Daisy Tan's speech do not simply reflect her failure to learn correct English, but rather, they represent an innovative and vibrant mode of languaging, reflective of its creator's identity and agency. Daisy Tan's creative use of English challenges the rigid monolithicity of standard English. This new personal linguistic system developed by Daisy Tan is so influential that her American-born daughter, Amy Tan, eventually adopts it at home and declares it as her mother tongue. By her teens, Amy Tan learns to "speak a modified form of English at home," eliminating "in real time the words and also the idioms" that her mother would probably not understand. Tan often avoids "complicated English constructions and concepts" to fine-tune her

standard English speech to conform to her mother's nonstandard English (344). Tan also notes that while her mother's English might have been limited, this did not impair her understanding of her rights or duties as an American citizen. Her mother had not only learnt about the American Constitution and its amendments for her citizenship test; she also understood very well what they implied. Amy Tan's declaration that her mother's English "was sufficient" debunks the popular misconceptions that the language and understanding of first-generation immigrants, particularly those coming from Asian countries like China, are deficient (344). By recognising her mother's social knowledge, comprehension of American political systems, and revealing her efforts to pass her English proficiency test through forged documentation, Tan destabilises the binary distinctions between fluency and ignorance. Linguistic fluency should not be reduced to grammatical ability but rather must be seen in tandem with the larger dynamics of social exclusion, cultural negotiation, and pursuit of survival. The personalised English of her mother emerges as a symbol of defiant resistance against exclusion, representing a transcultural understanding of linguistic diversity.

Amy Tan thus questions the dominant American society's prejudices about the linguistic skills of first-generation Chinese immigrants like her mother. Tan argues that while her mother's English may differ significantly from the standard English that the majority of Americans prefer, it is still acceptable and efficient enough for communication. In fact, Tan goes so far as to imply that her mother's expressive language might even be more suitable than standard English in conveying the unique lived experiences of first-generation Chinese immigrants like

her. As the author clarifies in her essay, despite her limited English vocabulary and unconventional syntax, her mother Daisy could effectively convey the complicated realities of life both in China and America using her richly expressive language. Immigrants who are proficient in multiple languages other than English, like Shanghainese and Mandarin in the case of Daisy Tan, often have much stronger communicative abilities than monolingual individuals, who are often constrained by the metaphors and usages of their singular language. They are, in Pratt's terms, "linguistically endowed persons, whose knowledge of other languages is a resource for themselves and others" ("Building" 116).

Like Tan's mother, first-generation immigrants often develop their own versions of English, influenced by the idioms, metaphors, and ways of expression from their native languages. As a linguist herself, Amy Tan understands that this is the process by which languages stay alive and develop, rather than by conforming rigidly to standard norms of expression. The new version of English developed by her mother actually functions also as a linguistic resource for Amy Tan herself as an author, as she self-admittedly uses "all the Englishes" she grew up with in writing her fiction (Tan, "Mother Tongue" 8). Therefore, for Tan, her mother's creative manipulations of her available linguistic repertoire signal a language multiplicity rather than a deficiency. As Trinh T. Minh-ha writes in *Woman, Native, Other*, individuals "differ in the content of the words, in the construction and weaving of sentences… in the choice and mixing of utterances, the ethos, the tones, the paces, the cuts, the pauses" (2). Language is much more than its words, syntax, and grammar; it also includes different nuances, tonal variations, and other modes of

individual expression. Immigrant expressions, with their variety and dynamicity, therefore contribute positively to the growth of a language. It is this linguistic diversity that Amy Tan endorses in her writings, as she extensively defends her mother's English, emphasising that there are multiple ways to express oneself and that each of these modes is valid in its own right.

Tan's views of her mother's English in terms of its emotional precision rather than correctness of usage highlight how language operates not just as a means of communication but also as a site of affective connections. Here, language is redefined as a space of empathy and awareness rather than a standard to be accomplished. This discourse is continued in the author's recollections about her mother's struggle with Alzheimer's disease. As her condition worsens, Daisy Tan loses her languages in the reverse order of acquisition: first English, then Mandarin, and lastly her mother tongue, Shanghainese, leaving behind only sounds, gestures, and touch to rely upon. However, Tan does not regard this stage of her mother's life as a complete breakdown of communication but rather an adjustment into a different mode of contact. Language in this phase becomes embodied. Meaning at this juncture is communicated through intimacy, touch, rhythm, and mutual recognition:

> Our primary language was emotion, the touch of my hand on hers and her hand on mine. It was the tone of our voices, our gestures, and the degree of animation of our limbs. It was my facial expressions and my interpretation of what hers would have been had she been able to smile or frown or look puzzled…Even toward the end of her conscious life, she understood all those things conveyed through only intonation and tone of voice, the expressions

> of love, assurance, and happiness. Take out the words, and the meaning was still there. Say it in any language and the meaning was the same. This was our shared language of emotions. It bypassed the part of the brain where syntax, semantics, and phonological rules operate. It was processed in the area where long-term emotional memories are stored, beginning with the morning words she must have heard her mother say when she was a baby: "Don't cry. I'm going to feed you," the shapes of sounds that meant comfort and trust. She used them with me. (*Where the Past Begins* 333)

The above excerpt challenges conventional assumptions on language that prioritise speaking, fluency, and semantic clarity over its emotional impact. Tan's account of her mother's descent into Alzheimer's disease suggests that communication may continue even after words are no longer available. For diasporic and transcultural individuals, whose linguistic backgrounds are frequently fractured, such moments highlight the various alternate ways in which meaning and memory continue to survive. The transition from acquired to inherent language represents a return to the primitive, more deeply embedded parts of an individual's linguistic identity. What occurs here is not a simple linguistic loss but a return to an archive of the embodied language that is emotional and intimate and cannot be reduced to grammar or vocabulary.

Tan continues this emphasis on the emotional and embodied aspects of language in her reflections on her early experiences with Mandarin. While her mother primarily spoke Shanghainese, her father was Cantonese, and the common language that linked the author's parents was Mandarin. Like many Chinese

American parents of the time, her parents also did not mandate the formal study of Chinese, due to a common misconception that bilingualism would hamper her fluency in English. Still, Tan absorbed Mandarin in fragments due to constant exposure to the language at home. These fragments were acquired not through systematic study but through repeated phrases heard at home during everyday routines and emotionally charged interactions with her mother. These fragments of Mandarin, often short commands, warnings, or reprimands, are therefore closely linked to the mood, tone, and memory of the moments in which they were delivered. The meanings of these "common expressions" are inseparably linked to the contexts in which they were used, and by the emotional effect delivered by them (338). In this sense, for Tan, Mandarin is maintained within her in its bits and pieces, and therefore, while it is often inconsistently understood, it is also most intensely felt. In fact, Tan admits that some of her non-Chinese friends who learnt Mandarin formally had a better grip on the language than herself. They could write, construct sentences, and send emails in the language better than the author. However, Tan insists that she possessed

> . . . intuitions in Mandarin they will never have, and it is those aspects of language that would never be taught in language school. They have to do with expressions that come through the daily life of a child raised by Chinese parents. I am fluent in emotional nuance, intent, and subtext of words said in anger, with worry, or with tenderness. (*Where the Past Begins* 339)

Clearly, like her mother's lack of standard English, Tan does not consider her own inadequacy of formal Mandarin as a failure but only as another representation of

how language lingers in the body, through sound, emotion, and relational memory. These linguistic fragments become part of the author's transcultural identity as the enduring proof of the translingual environment that she was raised in and in which her subjectivity was formed. These words and phrases also function as mnemonic archives that store personal and emotional memories, albeit not visually but in tonal and rhythmic detail.

The above idea that learning a language is a fragmented, emotionally marked process rooted in interpersonal exchanges is a continuation of Tan's earlier observations on her mother's English, as well as linguistic decline during her illness. It reiterates the notion that language does not always follow through the normative patterns of fluency and formal structure. For transcultural individuals like Amy Tan and her mother Daisy, identity is often shaped by partial inheritance of various aspects of speech, leaving behind emotional residues and sound traces rather than whole linguistic systems. Tan acknowledges her lack of mastery over Mandarin but at the same time, acknowledges the emotional and perceptive relationship she shares with the language due to her heritage.

Tan's favourable attitude towards her fragmented Mandarin, influenced by familial relationships and emotional resonance, is in stark contrast with the approach of Yiyun Li towards the same language. While second-generation immigrant authors Kingston and Tan, who negotiate between their parents' Chinglish and the standard English of the dominant American society, consider language as a tool for the reclamation of their cultural identity, Li, a first-generation Chinese immigrant, rejects her mother tongue, Mandarin, and deliberately chooses English as her

language of self-expression. In her unconventional memoir titled *Dear Friend, from My Life, I Write to You in Your Life* (2017), Li embarks on a profound exploration of her complex relationship with time, memory, and language, as well as her struggles with mental health amidst the challenges of living in a new country. Her deliberate choice of exophony is a central aspect of Li's literary identity. As Martina Renata Prosperi observes in the article "Writing for the Wor(l)Ds", Li's rejection of her mother tongue in favour of English allows her to inhabit "the convention of language with detachment and awareness," and that "her contribution to world literature lies in her bold dissociation from any conventional, crystallized and thus imprisoning use of language" (159–60). This deliberate linguistic self-exile and self-imposed monolingualism by Li makes the current discussion of bilingualism as a transcultural strategy more complicated. Her deliberate decision to write exclusively in English becomes a radical act of self-alienation and identity reconfiguration. It also raises a very different question: can transcultural identity be shaped by forcing oneself to be monolingual in an "adopted language" (Y. Li, *Dear Friend* 150)? As a writer, Li's relationship with language, as revealed in this memoir, is not simply presented as a medium of storytelling. Instead, language here becomes the site where her personal memories, traumas, and various aspects of identity intersect.

Unlike Tan and Kingston, who were born in the United States and grew up in an English-speaking environment, Li grew up speaking Mandarin in China and moved to America as an adult, as "an aspiring immunologist" (14). However, as explored in her autobiographical snippets in this memoir, her relationship with her mother tongue, Mandarin, is as complicated as that with her mother. While Li does

not go into details about her mother, the memoir's prose often betrays the complications in their relationship. Li writes about her mother as a "family despot, unpredictable in both her callousness and her vulnerability" (19). When Li was little, her mother would whisper to her that her father would "marry someone else" the moment she died and that the reason she could not die was because she did not want her daughter to "live under a stepmother" (69). Li connects her own experience with her mother's "wrathful and possessive love" with that of the Russian novelist Turgenev, whose mother "reigned over the household with pride and rage." Turgenev's life abroad as "an abandoner in his mother's eyes," draws parallels with Li's own life in exile, which, in a way, is an escape from her mother's haunting presence (90-91). In another instance, Li recounts how her mother had spoken of her as a selfish person for nearly all of her life and how she had always been the preferred daughter over her sister, which caused much discomfort to her (125). These recollections reveal an emotionally manipulative environment in which the author had grown up in China. Her mother's "whispers" had filled her with anxieties about abandonment and replacement, a curse that haunted her even as an adult.

Li projects her difficult relationship with her mother onto Mandarin, the language of these traumatic childhood exchanges, and her mother tongue. According to Cathy Caruth, psychological trauma manifests not in a single violent event in an individual's past but rather in the fragmented bits of memory that resist full assimilation into consciousness (3–4). In the case of Li, the emotionally charged messages repeated by her mother during her formative years become reminders of her vulnerabilities and anxieties. The maternal voice and Mandarin, the language in

which it speaks, become the carriers of these traumatic childhood memories that the author wishes to remove from her life. The author imbues the language itself with the emotional weight of these memories, carrying the difficulties of her relationship with her mother. The authoritative and oppressive overtones of this mother-daughter relationship also reflect the repressive environment of the state-controlled Chinese society, where strict adherence to sociopolitical norms is expected. Like the controlled uniformity of "Beijing time," which the whole nation has to use in spite of being located across five time zones, Mandarin, the official language of the state, also becomes a symbol of the conformity expected of its citizens (7). This homogeneity enforced by the authoritative governmental system in the country extends beyond mere communication; it pervades every avenue of their personal expression and identity. In this socio-political environment, language is not an innocent medium of communication, but a tool for social control. This social control is illustrated in the aftermath of the historic Tiananmen Square incident of 1989, when prospective first-year university students like Li were required to attend a year-long military training "to prevent future insubordination." Li writes that at the age of eighteen, she tried to present herself as "different from others," using her flair for language to write "obliquely subversive poetry when [she] was ordered to write propaganda." Although she recounts this incident as proof of her "youthful conceit" and "foolishness," this episode shows the author's early attempts at linguistic rebellion (27-28). The incident shows how language can simultaneously be used as a tool for propaganda as well as a form of subtle individual resistance.

Another instance that demonstrates Li's complex relationship with Mandarin is the oratory contest she participated in during high school. Li writes that, "for some mischievous reason," she deliberately moved the listeners to tears "by the poetic and insincere lies" that she had "made up." The subsequent realisation that she "could become a successful propaganda writer" disturbs the author very much. The author's feeling of disturbance reveals how, even as a teenager, she preferred authentic self-expression more than the propagandistic discourse that dictated the system that she grew up in. Even at a young age, the author recognises the power of language to influence and control public sentiment and elicit specific reactions from the public. Here, her mother tongue, Mandarin, which is also the state-dictated official language of the nation, becomes a symbol of the unbridled power of ideological control that language possesses. Li's early realisation that she herself, as a proficient user of the language, holds some of this ominous power creates feelings of unease in her. The author's feelings of unease and disturbance at her own prowess at propaganda reveal the internal tensions between the public language that the sociopolitical system expects her to employ and the private language of her own true self. As a naturally private person, her silence had always been misinterpreted by people around her. As Li reflects, people, including her mother, had always accused her of "stealthiness" and "hiding," which made her seem "less trustworthy" to them (7). This kind of constant scrutiny of her naturally reticent behaviour causes the author to be more cautious about the public sphere, where language often serves as an instrument of surveillance and conformity. In the public sphere, especially in China, where she grew up, Li was always confronted with fixed codes of behaviour and prescribed

narratives that she felt compelled to conform to. However, even as a young person, Li desired to be "true to herself, and to the world."

Li finds it increasingly difficult to achieve this authenticity of self within the confines of Mandarin, which corresponds to the public language in her homeland. With "only the public language," she cannot "form a precise thought, recall an accurate memory, or even feel a genuine feeling" (*Dear Friend* 147). Therefore, for Li, a private language, "spoken to oneself," different from her mother tongue, becomes useful in distancing her private life from public life. English offers a blank page upon which she can write a new chapter of her life, unlike Mandarin, which bears the burden of her traumatic childhood and the resonances of public discourse. More than being merely a second language, English thus functions as a deliberate existential choice that simultaneously signifies liberation and alienation. English, with its "intrinsic distance," makes the author feel "invisible but not estranged" (147). This invisibility feels liberating for the author, as it allows her to explore her thoughts and emotions with a sense of detachment, devoid of any external pressures and expectations. With English as her language of self-expression, Li is able to create for herself, a private linguistic space, which frees her from the "historical responsibility" and pressures of "being a political writer," which is generally expected of writers from China (65). The choice of English also allows Li to align more with the western literary tradition, which includes writers like Katherine Mansfield, Stefan Zweig, William Trevor, Ivan Turgenev, Vladimir Nabokov, Elizabeth Bowen, George Eliot, and many others whose works resonate deeply with her. This decision to align herself with Western literary figures also enables Li to

escape the supposition that, as a writer from China, she should solely represent her country's literary heritage. By doing so, Li also asserts her right to explore universal themes and experiences that transcend national, cultural, or linguistic boundaries.

Despite Li's conscious choice of English as her writing language, her relationship with this "adopted language" is never straightforward (150). While writing in English frees her from the preordained expectations associated with Mandarin, English lacks the intimacy or belonging that a mother tongue would provide. She is constantly faced with criticisms of her English "not being native enough," "neither lavish nor lyrical," or that "English would remain a foreign language" to her (142). While writing in English, every word "has to be pondered over" before she can claim ownership of it (146). While this detachment is liberating to some extent, it also marks the language as a constant site of struggle and negotiation. This struggle is evident in Li's discomfort with the subject pronoun 'I', which she calls a "melodramatic" and "embarrassing" word (27). The Chinese language allows for sentence construction without this subject pronoun, illustrating the collectivist values of the culture itself. The direct self-assertion promoted by Western culture, represented by the English language, clashes with the collectivist values that the author is more accustomed to in her upbringing. Li's struggle with the subject pronoun symbolises her larger struggle with navigating the cultural and linguistic differences between her native and adopted environments. This is also reminiscent of Jade Snow Wong's struggle with the first-person narrative style in her autobiography *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, which ultimately favours a third-person detached style of narration.

Furthermore, since language is integrally connected to one's memories, Li's transition from Mandarin to English is also accompanied by a disconnect in her memories. For instance, Li writes that she cannot "excavate anything from memory" when someone asks her about her first impressions of Iowa City, where she had first landed in America. She surmises that this was because she had never described the city to anyone in Chinese, while English had not yet been established as her language at the time (*Dear Friend* 139–40). The memory loss Li feels here is not a simple failure of recollection but a symptom of her linguistic displacement. While she had consciously abandoned her native language, she had also not yet claimed ownership of her new language, English, at that time. The resulting void in articulation points to a liminal space of existence, where the native language is no longer available while the adopted language is still under construction within the author's self. For Li, these memories about her initial days in America become the incidental casualties in her conscious process of self-translation from her mother tongue, Mandarin, to her adopted tongue, English. It may also be a response to the "crisis of alterity" that is caused by the "troubled process of translating herself into her adopted language – English – by 'killing' her mother tongue" (Pesaro 123). The ruptures in memory experienced by the author are caused by this process of self-translation, and they betray the ongoing struggle and negotiation involved with the formation of transcultural subjectivities.

While Li engages language and its interplay with self and identity with a deeply existential and philosophical consideration in her memoir, her short story "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers" (2006) explores the same linguistic struggle

within the realm of intercultural and intergenerational fissures. In this short story, Li examines the way language serves as both a barrier as well as a bridge between generations and cultures as she explores the strained relationship between Mr. Shi, an elderly Chinese man, and his recently divorced American daughter and a rare friendship with an elderly Persian woman, referred to as 'Madam,' who lives in the neighbourhood.

The irony of Mr. Shi's situation is that his relationship with Madam, with whom he shares no language, is much warmer than that with his daughter, with whom he shares his native language. In spite of not having a common language between them, Mr. Shi and Madam share a transcultural camaraderie by talking about their life in America, about their children, and about their life in their native countries. When they "run out of English," they switch to their native languages, which the other does not speak. In spite of this, "they have no problem understanding each other" (*A Thousand Years* 186–87). Even in the absence of a language, Mr. Shi's interactions with Madam are very organic and natural. Both of them being outsiders in a new country, navigating the universal complexities of ageing, family, and displacement, their common experiences transcend linguistic differences. They nod, smile, and intently listen to each other as they speak in broken English or in their separate languages and understand each other "with or without the translation"(*A Thousand Years* 192). Their interactions underscore the power of nonverbal communication in conveying emotions beyond the separation of languages. True communication is not simply about exchanging information; it is about having empathy, shared emotions, and the willingness to listen.

Mr. Shi's friendship with Madam, "a stranger who does not even know his language," serves as a counterpoint to his strained relationship with his daughter, where emotional and cultural displacement take precedence over their shared language. Mr. Shi feels that his daughter's silent behaviour is the result of her unhappiness because of her recent divorce. As a concerned parent, he came to America to make her feel better and help her find happiness again. However, his daughter repeatedly rejects Mr. Shi's attempts to connect with her, "becoming quieter each day" (*A Thousand Years* 190). In time, Mr. Shi realises that his daughter had been having an affair with a married Romanian man and that she was not as innocent as he had believed in the breakup of her marriage. In contrast to his natural interactions with Madam even in the absence of a common language, Mr. Shi's conversations in Chinese with his daughter feel forced, distant, and even fraught with bitterness. On the other hand, Mr. Shi notices that his daughter seems much happier and livelier on the phone when she speaks to her "special friend" in English, her voice "shriller than he has ever known it to be" (*A Thousand Years* 197). This incident illustrates the linguistic and emotional displacement between the father and daughter. Despite having a common language to talk between them, their conversations are strained and emotionally displaced. His daughter, on the other hand, finds emotional liberation in English, much like the author Li herself. The daughter's preference for her adopted language, English, which is alien to her father, signifies her desire to symbolically and functionally detach herself from him as well as his traditional outlook on life. As a Chinese patriarch with old-school values, Mr. Shi perceives his daughter's divorce and romantic affair in an accusatory and judgemental manner. Much like the author Li, who finds it difficult to express

herself in her mother tongue, Mr. Shi's daughter also acknowledges that she does not "talk well in Chinese." Having grown up in Communist China during the Cultural Revolution, Chinese was the language that taught her to suppress her feelings and keep secrets, which is something she claims that she learnt from her father himself. During their time in China, Mr. Shi had kept it a lifelong secret from his family that he had been demoted from his job as a rocket scientist, as punishment for his unusual friendliness with a woman coworker who was much younger than him. Having grown up with his secrets, Mr. Shi's daughter had also "learned not to talk," which also later resulted in her inability to talk to her own former husband about the problems in their marriage. Both author Li and her character's problem with their first language is that, embedded in a history of silence, secrets, repression, and discipline, the Chinese language does not provide them a safe avenue to express their feelings. As Mr. Shi's daughter declares, "...if you grew up in a language that you never used to express your feelings, it would be easier to take up another language and talk more in the new language. It makes you a new person" (*A Thousand Years* 199). This parallels Yiyun Li's own choice of casting herself as a linguistic exile from her mother tongue while choosing English as a tool for self-reinvention. Such a radical act of linguistic self-alienation also means a profound transformation in one's identity. By choosing a new language, the author and her character distance themselves from the ideological, cultural, and emotional baggage associated with their native language. For Li, Chinese is associated with the history of childhood trauma as well as a repression of her true self, while for Mr. Shi's daughter, it signifies a repression of feelings as well as patriarchal judgements from her father. By choosing English, both the author Li and her character, Mr. Shi's

unnamed daughter, find for themselves a new linguistic space that allows for a truer articulation of their thoughts, which were otherwise stifled in their mother tongue. Just like the author Li, her character, Mr. Shi's daughter, is also caught between two linguistic worlds, and her choice of alienating herself from Chinese in favour of English binds her perpetually in a state of self-translation.

As observed in both Li's memoir and fiction, this process of self-translation is not simply a linguistic experiment but a central aspect of an immigrant's ongoing negotiations of transcultural identity. Li's transcultural subjectivity aligns with Mikhail Epstein's concept of "transculture" as "a next level of liberation," "the freedom from one's own culture, in which one was born and educated" (Epstein 327, 330). By consciously dissociating herself from her native cultural and linguistic environment, Li engages herself in a process of self-redefinition. Through this radical act, she attempts to break free from the psychological, cultural, and emotional limitations that language itself had come to represent for her. She does not simply change the medium of her creative expression but rather completely refuses to be shaped by the political and cultural structures encoded in Mandarin. For Li, choosing to write in English is not merely adopting a second language but creating an avenue for creative autonomy, liberated from the binds of inherited traditions and historical memory. Unlike Kingston and Tan, Li seeks not to synthesise Chinese and English into a hybrid identity, but rather, she seeks a form of creative expression that transcends cultural binaries altogether. By attempting to liberate herself from the "prisonhouse of language," Li aspires to achieve a "'supra-cultural' creativity" through her adoption of a new language of expression (Epstein 327, 330).

A distinct kind of self-translation from that of Li drives the transcultural negotiations in Jean Kwok's debut novel. In this case, the protagonist's self-translation from Cantonese to English is marked by practical necessity rather than existential or emotional considerations. Published in 2010, *Girl in Translation* tells the story of an eleven-year-old Chinese immigrant girl, Kimberly Chang, and her mother (referred to as *Ma)*, who had emigrated from Hong Kong to New York in the later decades of the twentieth century, around the time of the former's handover from the United Kingdom to the People's Republic of China. The novel is narrated in the voice of an adult Kimberley as she reminisces about the troubles and hardships she faced as a young new immigrant to achieve success through her natural academic brilliance, ultimately graduating from Yale and Harvard universities to become a paediatric cardiac surgeon. The novel may be considered a sort of a linguistic bildungsroman, which relates the journey of its protagonist as she acquires a new language. It is a coming-of-age story, which highlights the struggle faced by its adolescent protagonist as she straddles between two cultures and languages and how these experiences shape her subjectivity as well as her relationships with the people around her. While it is not strictly autobiographical, Kwok has acknowledged that the novel is deeply inspired by her own experiences as a first-generation immigrant from Hong Kong to New York ("About"). On the surface, the novel is a simplistic, even typical, take on the model-minority immigrant tale, in which an immigrant possessing unusual academic brilliance, often of Asian ethnicity, battles extreme hardships and achieves success in life, the much-touted 'American dream.' However, on delving deeper, one could see that the novel represents more than just an immigrant 'model-minority' story. Monica Chiu

acknowledges that the novel "participates in what Shelley Fisher-Fishkin names 'transnational perspectives'... in its recognition of 'the limitations of an English-only approach to American studies'" (187).

Until recently, America had never had an official language until President Donald Trump signed an executive order on 1 March 2025, designating English as the official language ("Designating"). However, there have been campaigns and movements from the early twentieth century across the country to make English the sole official language of the government. Several states have separately enacted legislation making English their official state language. This socio-political movement was called the 'English-only' movement, and its supporters sought to promote unity and assimilation among various cultural groups using a common language, English. However, the detractors of this movement point to its discriminatory potential to suppress the cultures and languages of immigrants and minority ethnic groups and put them at a disadvantage compared to native English speakers in accessing education, job opportunities, healthcare, and government services. Furthermore, the ideas behind the English-only movement are often based on what Wallace Lambert calls "subtractive" bilingualism. This means that people might lose their fluency in their native language and switch to the dominant language completely in one or two generations (25). Such a subtraction of the native language and language shift has serious negative consequences on the minority individuals' psychosocial identity as they feel a lack of real connection with their ethnolinguistic group, as well as themselves. The movement is an attempt to enforce a singular "linguistic habitus," which, in Bourdieu's terms, is a set of acquired

linguistic behaviours that influence the way people speak and use language in various social contexts and are reflective of their social background (qtd. in Thompson 17). This exerts a symbolic violence on the minority language communities by diminishing and devaluing their cultural identities. It also greatly affects their educational achievements, as the pressures related to language acquisition and language barriers can result in underperformance and even lead to greater drop-out rates among minority children. While it may not be too challenging to acquire basic communication skills in English, the proficiency required for superior academic performance is often unattainable, especially for students coming from lower-income families (Padilla et al. 4). The language-deficient minority children inevitably have to put in much greater effort in their academic work than their peers to compensate for their lack of English proficiency. This greater pressure can instil a sense of shame and contribute negatively to immigrant children's sense of self-worth. In *Girl in Translation,* Jean Kwok reflects on the implications of these apathetic language attitudes as well as the socio-economic, cultural, and academic challenges faced by new immigrants coming to the United States in the later part of the twentieth century.

Roman Kushnir, in her analysis of Patricia Eilola's novel *American Plus Finnish,* mentions *Girl in Translation* among a list of novels that deal "with the protagonists' (linguistic) experiences in a new country" and "illustrate the younger immigrant generation's identity conflicts and power struggles, the generational gap, and the dual life caused by growing up speaking two languages" (8). Indeed, Kwok's debut novel shows this preoccupation with the protagonist's linguistic

experiences, beginning with its title, *Girl in Translation,* itself. Here, the word 'translation' manifestly points to the process and struggle of English language acquisition that young Kim undergoes upon arriving in New York. However, language acquisition forms only one part of the word's meaning as used in this title. In its most elemental sense, translation also indicates a transformation.

As a Cantonese-speaking adolescent immigrant girl from Hong Kong, Kimberly has to transform herself and grow into an English-speaking American woman. As a young adolescent girl inhabiting the contact zone between two languages, cultures, and social worlds, she must translate herself not only linguistically but also in terms of cultural norms, values, and expectations as she attempts to adapt to her new life in America while also maintaining her own cultural identity. Therefore, the word translation also serves as a metaphor for the protagonist's experiences as she grapples with the changes and challenges associated with immigration across continents. This very act of having been "carried across" continents makes Kimberly a translated person, a cultural translation in the sense that Salman Rushdie and Homi Bhabha evoke it as "the process and condition of human migrancy" (Trivedi).

Christopher Lee, in an article titled "The Writing of Translation," comments that Asian American writers often "mobilize" the trope of translation "to convey the experience of living across cultures," translation being an "indispensable as well as inescapable means for navigating multilingual everyday realities" (130). Jean Kwok calls her protagonist Kimberly a 'girl in translation' and not a *translated girl*, alluding to the continuity of the process of cultural translation. A migrant is never completely translated out of her original language and culture—there are almost

always some things that are lost in translation. Lost in translation are the residuals of the ancestral culture that remain knowingly or unknowingly within the migrant's self, contributing to her transcultural identity. The title also reflects on the untranslatability of the various intricacies of their experiences as first-generation immigrants. It aptly alludes to the broader themes of the novel: the complexities of immigrant experiences and how language and culture can shape identities and interpersonal relationships.

Throughout the novel, the main characters, Kimberly and her mother, are in translation in one way or another, as they struggle to communicate with others as well as with each other across cultural, linguistic, and generational barriers. The first and most important translation that Kim has to undergo involves a transformation from the Chinese Ah-Kim to the American Kimberly Chang. Her mother affectionately refers to her as Ah-Kim, a name rooted in her Chinese heritage, symbolising her origin and cultural identity. Upon arrival in America, as Aunt Paula emphasises, it becomes "very important to have a name that is as American as possible," so as to ease her transition into American society (13). The change from Ah-Kim to Kimberly reflects her initial steps towards assimilation, showcasing her determination to adapt and integrate into American society. As a new immigrant from Hong Kong, Ah-Kim's mother tongue is the Cantonese dialect of Chinese, the only language that she and her mother speak fluently. For immigrants like Ah-Kim and her mother, who have left everything behind in their native country, their mother tongue is often the only thing that links them to their homeland and serves as a symbol of their cultural identity. Being the language that they grew up speaking and

dreaming in, Cantonese becomes a source of comfort and familiarity for both of them. Even after migrating to America, the mother and daughter speak to each other in Cantonese, and this continued connection to their native language helps them feel a sense of comfort and intimacy even within the strange new space that they find themselves in. In cleaning and setting up their first home in New York, Ah-Kim and Ma make use of various Chinese cultural artefacts to overcome the bad *feng shui* with which the apartment was built. Among these is the "*Tong Sing,* the Chinese Almanac," which they put on the head of their mattress. The written Chinese characters and words in this almanack are deemed to be powerful: "[t]here are many *phu* in these books, words of power written by ancient masters that can pin a white bone demon under a mountain or repel wild fox spirits" (*Girl in Translation* 20). These words of power in their mother tongue provide them with a sense of security and familiarity in this unfamiliar environment. Another instance is on her first day at the factory, when Kim spots a "wrinkled piece of Chinese newspaper in the industrial trash can" and stealthily takes it: "it gave [her] heart to see the familiar characters" (32). The mere sight of the familiar characters of her mother tongue has the power to offer comfort from the insecurities that Kimberly felt as she struggled to come to terms with her new surroundings.

Further, the Chinese language also signifies and reveals the nature of intimacies and tensions between the characters Kim, her mother, and Aunt Paula. The mother tongue possesses the ability to reveal the intricate dynamics of interpersonal relationships between these characters, even without explicit articulation. For Ma and Ah-Kim, Cantonese is the language in which they

understood each other's fears and insecurities perfectly, even without having to convey them directly. For instance, Kim could perceive when her mother was nervous, simply by listening to the way she spoke: "Although Ma's Cantonese was usually very clear, the sound of her country roots grew more pronounced when she was nervous" (7). Therefore, for them, their mother tongue serves as their language of intimacy, their "home tongue," a language they can return to at home in comfort with each other after struggling with English all day outside (Anzaldua 56).

On the other hand, the native language also exposes the cracks and fissures in the relationship between the two sisters, Ma and Aunt Paula, through the kind of "Chinese" they spoke to each other. As their native land Hong Kong awaited the fated transfer of political power from the United Kingdom to the People's Republic of China, Ah-Kim and Ma had arrived in New York at Aunt Paula's place, on the promise of a job taking care of Aunt Paula's children and teaching them Chinese, while also improving their own English in the process. However, due to Ma's history of tuberculosis, Paula refuses to let them live with her and moves them to an old, abandoned one-room apartment with no heating, broken windows, and infested with pests. Aunt Paula finds Ma a job "hanging dresses—doing the finishing work" for which "you don't need any skills…just to work hard" (15). While Aunt Paula talks down to Ma and Kimberly in an outwardly sweet but indirectly authoritative, condescending tone, Ma replies always in a submissive, grateful tone, reflecting the sense of helplessness she feels on being indebted to and having to depend upon her older sister whom she had not seen in thirteen years. As Ma tells Kimberly, "[i]t is not easy to understand Chinese. Certain things are not said directly…" (11). In these

instances, “Chinese” stands not simply for their native language but also for the meanings that are not conveyed directly through speech, meanings that are to be inferred in the varied tones of articulation, and the “awkward silence” that follows what is said. To “truly understand Chinese,” the way grown-ups like Aunt Paula spoke, Kimberly had to know about the ways of the world and how interpersonal relationships worked outside of the innocent world of young children (14). Only upon being explained to by her mother could Kim truly understand that Aunt Paula, who was supposed to help and take care of them in the strange new country and talked to them in an outwardly sweet tone, was not always acting in their best interests. Beneath “the skin of polite talk” and promises of taking care of them as family, Aunt Paula had stealthily washed her hands off them and left them alone in the strange land.

> She’d done it all on purpose: letting us move on a weekday instead of during the weekend, giving us the presents at the last moment. She wanted to drop us here and have the factory as an excuse to leave fast, to get out when we were still thanking her for her kindness. Aunt Paula wasn’t going to help us. We were alone. (9)

After realising Aunt Paula’s desertion of them, Kimberly and her mother face the daunting task of navigating their new home country, the United States, on their own. However, their foremost challenge in this task is to learn English, which proves to be a difficult endeavour for both of them. Due to their limited English proficiency, they are forced to rely on Aunt Paula for even basic necessities, such as finding a place to live and a job for Ma. Although Ma was a talented and qualified music teacher back

in Hong Kong, her inability to speak English prevented her from pursuing higher-paying job opportunities beyond the menial work at the factory. Their lack of proficiency in English also leaves them vulnerable to exploitation and hostility in day-to-day situations. For instance, on their second day in their new neighbourhood, a shopkeeper overcharges them for supplies, but they are unable to communicate effectively due to their limited English skills (16). As Chinese immigrants and poor factory workers, they already face significant disadvantages in New York society. In addition to this, their lack of English proficiency further marginalises them in the power structure. Aunt Paula believes that Kimberly, who already spent her after-school hours helping her mother at the factory, would likely spend her entire life working there, just like the other girls who entered as children and left as grandmas. However, Kimberly understands that attaining professional education and embarking on a career was the only way she could escape the "circle of factory life" and provide for herself and her mother (31). Improving her English skills would not only help her to assimilate better into her new sociocultural environment but also would increase her chances of succeeding at school and making a career outside the factory. "Mastering the English language is a step to inclusion and empowerment, something the immigrant parents rarely have an opportunity to achieve, instead relying on their children to translate for them" (Gasztold 84). Thus, for Kimberly, the English language carries greater significance not just as a tool of communication and social integration in her new environment but also as the key to her pursuit of social mobility.

But, Kimberly's path to social mobility, through education and academic excellence, proves to be a long and strenuous pursuit. Kimberly's lack of English skills meant that she could hardly communicate with her teachers or fellow students at her school and could not properly understand her classes. While she did have basic English knowledge from her school in Hong Kong, the difference in the English accent makes it difficult for Kimberly to follow her teachers' classes and instructions. In her early days at her American school, Kimberly often misunderstands the words spoken to her by her teachers, school authorities, or peers. Jean Kwok expresses this phase in Kimberly's journey of language acquisition by writing the misheard words as they are, emphasised in italics in the novel's text. Kwok also writes Kim's dialogues in non-standard grammar, like when she explains to Mr. Bogart why she was late, saying, "We not find school." Many a time, Kimberly has to guess the meanings of the misheard questions and make an approximate answer, which often results in embarrassing situations like when she first enters Mr. Bogart's class.

> "Our new student *eye-prezoom?*"..."You're very late. What's your *exsu?*"
>
> I knew I had to answer, so I guessed. "Kim Chang."
>
> He stared at me for a second "I know what your name is," he said, enunciating each word. "What's your *exhus*?" (*Girl in Translation* 25)

Kimberly continues to mishear the words uttered in the unfamiliar American accent, hearing pop quiz as "pop *quick*," cheating as "*cheap pen,*" zero as *"hero,"* absent note as "*accent* note," ghetto as "*get dough,"* real estate as "*really state"* and so on (26-68). Moreover, the little English that she knows from her days in Hong Kong is

the British variant, and this causes embarrassing situations in class. This alludes to the incident when Kimberly asks for a “rubber” in class instead of an “eraser,” which causes the whole class to erupt in mocking laughter. Only later does she realise that the word ‘rubber,’ in American slang, means a condom, a knowledge that greatly embarrasses her (50-1). The misheard and misunderstood English depicted in the novel reflects the “difficulties of translation” of the complex problems faced by Kimberly in transitioning from Hong Kong to America and from childhood to adulthood (Ang 379).

Since she is the only Chinese student in class, Kimberly finds herself often utterly alone and without support, incapable of properly expressing her problems and experiences as a new minority immigrant student in an alien language that she could only barely understand and speak. When Mr. Bogart suspects her of trying to cheat on a test, Kimberly is unable to defend herself and can only say that she was sorry (Kwok *Girl in Translation* 26-7). Kimberly's only support came from her friend Annette, but even Annette could not fully comprehend the several challenges Kimberly faced due to cultural and social differences. Mr. Bogart’s unsympathetic attitude towards her language deficiency and her feelings of shame due to being accused of trying to cheat drove Kimberly to escape school for a week. Reading this in conjunction with the fact that many children of factory workers, including Kimberly's friend Matt, skip school or drop out altogether, it follows that such unsympathetic attitudes at school have a negative impact on their academic talent.

Kimberly’s experiences upon being abruptly immersed in an English-only environment reflect the challenges faced by immigrant children due to the

‘submersion’ style of English learning followed by schools. The ‘submersion’ method of English education, also termed the ‘sink or swim’ method, is one in which “limited English-proficient students are placed in regular English-speaking classrooms and asked to fend for themselves,” without considering whether or not they are able to understand the discussions, and without adaptation of the curriculum according to their needs (Gersten). While this method may be effective for some students, immigrant children without prior exposure to English may find it difficult to understand and participate in class activities at first, which can have a negative impact on their confidence and motivation. Complex academic content rendered in a language that they barely understand can result in frustrations due to their inability to comprehend it, impeding their overall learning. Combining this with the total disregard for and isolation from their cultural roots, the language barrier takes a toll on them emotionally, leading to frustration, self-doubt, and a feeling of voicelessness. These are the feelings that Kimberly herself fights throughout her formative years as a first-generation immigrant student in the American public school system.

Following multiple embarrassing situations at the public school, Kimberly returns to school only because of her unwavering desire to excel academically and improve the social conditions of herself and her mother. In this second innings at school, she seeks to completely apply herself to academic performance. Her natural aptitude and talent for mathematics and science set her apart from other students, but Kimberly still has a hard time mastering English. While perfecting her English

becomes the most important project in Kimberly's life, she has to work extremely hard to achieve this:

> *I had to perfect my English.* Not only did I write down and look up the words I didn't know in my textbooks, I started with the A's in my dictionary and tried to memorize all the words. I made a copy of the list and stuck it to the inside of the bathroom door. I had learned the phonetic alphabet in Hong Kong and that made it easier for me to figure out how the words were pronounced even though I still made mistakes. Our class went to the public library once a week and I always took out a stack of books, starting with the embarrassingly thin ones for little kids. I slowly worked my way up in age. I took these books with me to the factory and read them on the subway. Almost all of my homework was done either on the subway or at the factory. For the bigger projects, I caught up on Sundays (*Girl in Translation* 86).

Kimberly's efforts turn gradually fruitful, and her English skills finally improve with time. By the time she secured admission at the elite private school Harrison Prep on full scholarship, her English had improved enough to "understand most of what the teachers said, although the effort of listening so hard in English was tiring" (123). Slowly but steadily, she also finds the confidence and courage to participate in class discussions and answer the teacher's questions (124). At Harrison, Kimberly also receives help with English in the form of a senior student, Kerry, who is specially assigned as her tutor. Having a personal tutor with whom she could practise and get her mistakes corrected greatly helps her to improve, even though it still took her "three times longer to read the textbooks in English than if they'd been in Chinese"

(134). It also helps that her teachers "graded [her] English skills only by [her] improvement and not by how [she] compared with [her] classmates, who were all native speakers." Help also comes in the form of Mr. Jamali, the librarian, who gives her "old books and magazines that the library threw away" (146). Such unconditional support that she receives from compassionate individuals at her new school goes a long way in accelerating her language acquisition. By eighth grade, she no longer requires the services of a personal English tutor. As Kimberly conquers one milestone after another in life, her English too undergoes a gradual transformation from broken to standard English. This change in Kimberly's language skills is also manifested in the text of the novel, as the number of italicised words representing her mishearing and misinterpretation reduces as the novel progresses.

The journey from broken to standard English mirrors Kimberly's journey of assimilation into mainstream American society. As she becomes more competent in using English, she also becomes more confident in interacting with others at school. This is illustrated in the incident when Kimberly is suspected of cheating again at her new school due to another misunderstanding. This time, unlike the earlier instance with Mr. Bogart at the public school, Kimberly is able to defend her position by saying that she is too smart to cheat, and that it is "under" her, meaning that it is beneath her to cheat. It is evident here that Kim's improved English proficiency has empowered her to speak up to her teachers and assert her own qualities with confidence, a distinctly individualist American behavioural trait that would have been considered disrespectful and arrogant in her Chinese upbringing

that emphasises modesty and humility: “No good Chinese girl would say such a thing about herself” (152). Linguistic assimilation also helps Kimberly to blend more into her school circles and make new friends, thereby bridging the gap between her Chinese background and her American environment. While in her early days of American education in the public school, Kimberly only had Annette as a friend; at Harrison, gradually she came to be accepted into parties and sleepovers. Like other American teenage students, she also begins to have casual flings and brief romantic entanglements—another behaviour that would have been unthinkable in her traditional Chinese upbringing. These incidents also point to the Americanisation of Kimberly’s self. The more she perfects her language skills and interacts with others, the more she is drawn to American individualised thinking. She identifies with the typical American teenagers who desire “[f]reedom from their parents, from their own unsurprising selves, from the heavy weight of the expectations that had been placed upon them.” The freedom that Kimberly desired was from the “blistering realit[ies]” of the Chinese part of her life—poverty, socio-cultural anxieties, the struggle to fit in and find a place to call home, “the deafening thunder of sewing machines at the factory, the fierce sting of cold against [her] skin in [their] unheated apartment,” as well as the romantic tensions with her childhood friend Matt (205-6). At the same time, however, Kimberly realises deep down within her heart that however close she advanced to the American mainstream, these realities remain a part of herself: “[n]o matter how well I did in my classes or how well I managed to fake belonging to the cool circle, I knew I was not one of them” (238-9). As hard as she tries to translate herself into the American Kimberly Chang, the core traits and realities of Ah-Kim remain within her, lost in translation.

The linguistic and social strides that Kimberly takes towards the American mainstream have important implications for her relationship with Matt, practically the only relationship outside family that she maintained within her own native Chinese community. While Matt remains throughout the novel as Kim's only true love, their relationship is rendered impossible by her pursuit of the American dream of an Ivy League education and a career as a surgeon. As Kimberly learns the ways of communication with the mainstream, she also unlearns the ways of communication with Matt. Their relationship is consequently mired in miscommunications and misunderstandings, which is why they end up parting ways, despite her becoming pregnant with Matt's child out of wedlock. As Matt says, his "climbing" could never reach her "heights" (226). Kimberly's decision to not abort the foetus is influenced by her mother's teachings, although she decides on keeping it a secret from Matt purely for practical and individualistic considerations. Kimberly's keeping of the pregnancy and raising her son secretly is symbolic of her keeping Matt and her Chinatown community alive within her, even long after she and her mother had moved out of the community. It is also suggestive of a synthesis of both her Chinese and Americanised cultural environments.

> Kimberly's decision draws on both Chinese and American cultural understandings of what it means to be a woman. On the one hand, Kimberly embraces Chinese child-parent obligations. Her decision to have her child without Matt is a calculated move to improve her life that fulfils her obligations to her mother. This behaviour resonates with Chinese understandings of the *guai* child as being "useful." (Chen and Lau 301)

On the other hand, by having a child out of wedlock, she has become "Americanized" (301).

In the last chapter, readers meet Kimberly again, who is now a successful paediatric cardiac surgeon after completing her American dream and studying at Yale and Harvard. She is also a wonderful mother to her son, having combined both Chinese and American visions of parenting in raising him. Kimberly has taught her son her own mother tongue but speaks to him in both Chinese and English. Her and Matt's son, Jason, with his "excellent" Chinese and "perfect" English, thus symbolises an almost utopian amalgamation of both Chinese and American cultural and value systems that Kimberly learns to negotiate within herself (Kwok *Girl in Translation* 286). This final, translated, transcultural version of Kimberly "floats somewhere in between American and Chinese cultures," invoking, according to her desire and necessity, either part of her own self that she simultaneously encompasses within her (Tam 29). Situating herself in between two linguistic and cultural identities, Kimberly's self-translation serves as a creative mode of negotiating her Chinese self with an American one. Translation being a bridge between two linguistic worlds, Kwok's use of this metaphor signifies that Kimberly's journey is not one of complete assimilation but an integration of the two worlds she occupies. For Kimberly, her two languages become the threads that weave the different facets of her identity together into a whole self.

The current chapter has analysed how language is treated as a transcultural strategy in select Chinese American women's narratives, namely the autobiographical writings *The Woman Warrior* by Kingston, "Mother Tongue," and

Where the Past Begins by Amy Tan, *Dear Friend, from My Life, I Write to You in Your Life,* and the short fiction "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers" by Yiyun Li, as well as the novel *Girl in Translation* by Jean Kwok. The chapter has taken its inspiration from the discussion by Mary Louise Pratt on the necessity of a "linguistics of contact," an approach that investigates how language operates at the intersection of diverse cultures and languages, as well as across social differences. Employing theoretical concepts such as Bourdieu's "linguistic capital," Jeehyun Lim's "bilingual brokering," and Ch'ien's "weird English," the chapter explores how the narrators and protagonists in these works navigate the complexities of bilingualism, language anxieties, and language choices.

Kingston highlights her complicated, bilingual personhood in *The Woman Warrior* through abrupt shifts in narrative language, her use of 'Chinglish,' and embodied metaphors. Her use of these techniques generates a sense of fragmentation and polyvocality to the text, illuminating the complexities of her bilingual and bicultural identity. Both in the essay "Mother Tongue" and memoir *Where the Past Begins,* Amy Tan emphasises the emotional and cultural value of non-standard English by profoundly declaring her mother's fragmented English as her mother tongue and also asserting its validity and expressive richness. Tan upholds the emotional impact of language even in a state of linguistic breakdown due to illness, when non-verbal mode of communication emerges as an effective carrier of emotional meanings. Tan also reflects on her intuitive relationship with her fragmented Mandarin, considering it as an archive of emotional memory and familial connection rather than a linguistic deficiency. In contrast to these two

authors who embrace their bilingual heritage, Yiyun Li, a Chinese-born naturalised American author, complicates this discussion by deliberately alienating herself from her native tongue, Mandarin, and adopting English as her only language of expression. Li's non-fictional and fictional works examined here focus on identity reconfiguration and self-reinvention through self-imposed monolingualism. Jean Kwok, in her semi-autobiographical novel, presents a linguistic bildungsroman of her protagonist, whose journey of self-translation from Cantonese to American English emphasises the emotional and social implications of language acquisition for first-generation immigrants. This chapter has considered language not simply a means of communication but a powerful repository of identity, memory, and cultural elements. By exploring the complexities of language anxiety and choices in the bilingual contact zones of American English and Chinese, the works analysed here reveal language as a site of struggle and empowerment, emotion and familial bonding, a source of alienation and self-reinvention, as well as a conduit for cultural reclamation.

Chapter Three

Transcultural Spaces: Situating Self in the Contact Zones

Literary studies in the last many decades have undergone what is known as "the spatial turn," which points to an increased focus on the aspects of space, place, and geographical aspects in understanding social, cultural, and historical phenomena. Scholars have observed an apparent shift in literary and critical texts, from primarily using concepts related to time and historical progression to exploring how spatial aspects influence and shape human experiences and cultural expressions. For instance, Robert Tally Jr. notices "an increasingly spatial or geographical vocabulary in critical texts, with various forms of mapping or cartography being used to survey literary terrains, to plot narrative trajectories, to locate and explore sites, and to project imaginary coordinates" (12). This comes as a consequence of the influential articulations on the nature and politics of space and place by thinkers such as Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, Michel de Certeau, and Yi-Fu Tuan. Lefebvre's triad model of space differentiates between i) "spatial practice": the physical and material aspects of space, or "perceived space"; ii) "representations of space": the conceptual and abstract aspects of space, or "conceived space"; and iii) "spaces of representation": the experiential aspects of space, highlighting how individuals experience space and place in their daily lives, or "lived space" ("The Production of Space" 291). The perceived space is the everyday space of routine and activity, where individuals physically interact with each other and navigate. The conceived space is about how space is designed,

planned and represented through maps, architectural plans, and urban planning. This is the realm of engineers, scientists, architects, and urban planners. Finally, the lived space represents how ordinary individuals experience space and place in their everyday lives. It is not only a physical environment, but also bound to emotions, memory, and imagination. In this sense, lived space is also symbolic in nature, as it is felt through the associated images and symbols of daily life and culture.

One of the most prominent thinkers of the twentieth century, Foucault conceptualises "heterotopias" as real or imagined spaces that exist outside the everyday ordinary spaces, which pose as "counter-sites" that represent, contest, and invert the real spaces of society, potentially disrupting the conventional social orders and practices. For him, spatial organisations are complex, multiple, and inherently connected to power structures ("Of Other Spaces" 3–9). Therefore, heterotopias are different from the ordinary spaces of daily life, instead acting as alternatives or opposites to the real spaces of society. These may include spaces such as ships, cemeteries, bars, brothels, or prisons. Within these spaces, the usual social norms and orders are flipped, challenging how society usually operates according to the existing power structures.

Michel de Certeau distinguishes between "strategies" and "tactics," the former being the covert techniques used by institutions and power structures to control and define spaces, and the latter being the subtle, everyday actions that individuals take to either resist or adapt to these regulated spaces (*The Practice of Everyday Life* 35–38). Strategies are planned and calculated, often imposed by the system with a top-down approach. Urban planning, housing regulations, and other

official methods of managing space, aimed at establishing order and control, come under the rubric of strategies. Tactics, on the other hand, are how ordinary people without power navigate the controlled spaces available to them. These include spontaneous everyday actions that individuals undertake by finding shortcuts and loopholes within the controlled environment.

The Chinese-American humanist geographer Yi-Fu Tuan differentiates between "space" and "place" in his pioneering book *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Tuan perceives space as an abstract and expansive entity that "allows movement," and place as the space that has been rendered emotionally or culturally valuable through human experience, attachment, and memory (3–7). This means that space is the empty, unbounded area that simply exists. Place, on the other hand, is only constructed when 'things happen' within a space. Therefore, while space is the setting or background, place is the same setting endowed with some personal or cultural significance.

Doreen Massey, a British feminist geographer, builds upon these foundational concepts and considers gender as a crucial factor in the production of space. She argues that not only are spaces and places inherently gendered, as they reflect and reinforce societal gender norms, they also "both reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood." For instance, Massey writes, the limitation of women's mobility in space and identity has traditionally been a means of subordination in different cultures across the globe. Spaces and places also often carry symbolic meanings that transmit gendered messages, such as the 'home-

place' which is associated with women, while workplaces and public spaces are conventionally associated with men *(Space, Place and Gender* 179–80).

Just as spaces are gendered, they are also "racialized," meaning that racial identities and hierarchies are inscribed into physical spaces, particularly in the United States. Lipsitz argues that the national spatial imaginary of the United States is "racially marked" and shaped by segregation and discrimination. Exclusionary and discriminatory policies regarding housing, school district boundaries, policing practices, zoning regulations, and transit systems have historically confined people of colour to certain neighbourhoods and regions, effectively minimising their opportunities for economic and social mobility. These segregation related practices reinforce racial inequalities and pose significant systemic disadvantages for minority communities, including Blacks, Natives, Asians, Latinos, and others (10–12).

These theoretical as well as sociological deliberations have opened up diverse new trajectories for understanding how space, place, and identities intersect and interact with each other in literary works. Spatial theories in literary analysis provide new, effective modes of understanding how physical, social, or even cultural spaces can shape narratives, characters, and themes. These modes of understanding help critics explore the nuances of how individuals navigate the world, negotiate their identities, and understand how power dynamics work in various situations. This is especially important in literary works concerned with migration, diaspora, and ethnic identities. Dalia Kandiyoti underlines the importance of spatial theories to the study of diaspora literature by asserting that a "sense of place figures extensively in

experiences and stories of migration and diasporization…," even when marked by displacement and unhomeliness. She maintains that the:

> . . . stasis and continuity associated with place and the mobility and disjunction related to displacement are dismantled in diaspora narratives. In unstable situations related in migration narratives, the struggle with and the attachment to place are no less central to literary and cultural expression than in more stable contexts (3–4).

As a spatial activity, migration invariably involves practices of spatial mobilities and displacements, and migrants experience a loss of their initial homeland while also attempting to make a new home for themselves within the host nation. With its focus on how spaces and places shape individual and collective experiences, spatial theory can greatly inform the analysis of diaspora and ethnic minority literature. This may be possible through understanding the impact of displacement and unhomeliness experienced by immigrants, examining the negotiation of identities within new physical and cultural locations, analysing the power dynamics that play within these locations, and exploring the construction of new hybrid spaces such as ethnic enclaves and cultural centres.

Similarly, with its focus on porous borders and the flow of cultural elements across geographical, national, linguistic, and cultural divides, transcultural literary studies emphasises the intermixtures and hybridities of global cultures. In this context, spatial perspectives offer valuable insights in analysing how individual and cultural movements take place across various physical as well as metaphorical

boundaries, including national borders and sociocultural divides. They may help in mapping individual and collective movements across geographical boundaries, examining cultural flows, identifying and analysing transcultural spaces such as contact zones or borderlands, and practices, also highlighting the unique formations of identities in these spaces. These liminal, transitional zones often act as sites where ethnic minority communities navigate their identities, maintain cultural practices, and resist or negotiate with the dominant power structures.

Closely examining these spaces allows for challenging stereotypes and also helps in understanding the role of other intersecting factors like race, gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and language in the negotiation of an individual's identity within the given spatial location. It also warrants a look into the way in which individual bodies become sites of transcultural negotiation by acting as the medium on which sociocultural norms and expectations are inscribed, contested, and renegotiated. Such an intersectional approach is of utmost importance when reading minority ethnic women's literatures such as the Chinese American women's fiction examined here, namely, *Shanghai Girls* (2009)*, China Dolls* (2014) by Lisa See, *Girl in Translation* (2010), and *Mambo in Chinatown* (2014) by Jean Kwok. A spatial analysis of these transcultural women's texts can be especially illuminating in understanding the implications of factors like ethnicity and gender in women immigrants' lives. As minority ethnic women who straddle between the traditional patriarchal world of their families and a white-dominated American society, their experiences are inevitably shaped by overlapping systems of oppression that they encounter.

In the opinion of Amy D. Wells, oppression is one of the key elements that shape a woman's experience of space and place (351). The Chinese American women protagonists of these works often find themselves navigating a complex terrain of racial and gender oppression, gender roles, cultural expectations, and societal pressures. An analysis of how these women experience and navigate physical spaces such as their homes, workplaces, or public spaces can reveal the different levels of oppression as well as opportunities that they face due to their gender and ethnicity. Furthermore, it can show how these women negotiate and perform their transcultural identities in different settings. As they traverse across geographical, cultural, and social boundaries, the female protagonists of these novels adopt multiple subject positions that are often fluid, shifting, or even contradictory in character. It may be observed that their negotiation of identities is influenced and shaped by their interactions with/in the different spaces they inhabit. For instance, home as a space in some of these works may represent sites of tradition and patriarchy, where the protagonists are culturally expected to conform to traditional gender roles. However, at the same time, these spaces also hold the potential for resistance, where they challenge these patriarchal norms and assert their agency. Similarly, public spaces, including workplaces, schools, and neighbourhoods, may represent sites of both discrimination and opportunity, where they may face racial and gender prejudices but also find opportunities to assert their identities and achieve their dreams. An in-depth analysis of their experiences and interactions in various spaces, such as home, workplace, and public places, can shed light on the complexities of racial and gender discrimination, cultural expectations, and societal pressures. By reading the above-mentioned novels from a spatial perspective, this

chapter attempts to show how the female protagonists interact with the different spaces and places that they inhabit. The chapter also looks at how these interactions affect the formation of their transcultural identities, subject to the complex intersections of gender, race, class, and culture, and constantly transform as they navigate various spaces. In these novels by contemporary Chinese American authors Lisa See and Jean Kwok, spatial settings that include individual homes, hometowns, detention centres, workplaces, urban spaces, and Chinatown act as contact zones where the protagonists navigate, negotiate, and redefine their transcultural identities.

In an article titled "Beyond the Contact Zone?—Mapping Transcultural Spaces in Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach,"* Katja Sarkowsky takes up the spatial aspects of concepts like 'contact zone,' hybridisation, and transculturation to "highlight the role of space constructions as a means of transcultural negotiations in Native texts. She insists that these spaces "present ambivalence and contradictions and are constitutive of transcultural processes" (323-4). Though Sarkowsky concentrates on Native American literature, spatialities may be considered informative of the transcultural processes in other ethnic minority American literatures, such as Chinese American literature, as well. Especially concerning minority women's writings, it would be illuminating to look at how spatial constructions affect women's experiences with each other and their surroundings.

The spaces and places focused here with respect to See and Kwok's novels include individual homes, hometowns, detention centres, cities, ethnic enclaves, schools, and workplaces, including factories, restaurants, nightclubs, dance studios,

and film sets, among others. These spaces and places, which are observed to be both confining and liberating at various times, are examined for their active role in the protagonists' journeys of self-discovery and identity formation. They are not simply the settings where the stories take place but are active participants in the narrative. The protagonists' complex, often ambivalent relationship with these spaces reflects the fluidity and spontaneity of their transcultural subjectivities. For example, in the novel *Shanghai Girls* by Lisa See, the vibrant city of Shanghai, the confined spaces of Angel Island, and the historical China City of Los Angeles all play important roles in shaping the protagonists' identities. These spaces become active forces that mould their experiences and subjectivities, wherein their bodies themselves become the sites of cultural negotiation.

Published in 2009, *Shanghai Girls* follows the lives of Pearl Chin and her sister May, who are forced into an arranged marriage to two Chinese American brothers and have to flee their homeland during the Japanese invasion of the late 1930s. Their journey to Los Angeles is fraught with difficulties and obstacles, including the loss of their family due to the war, a disastrous encounter with the Japanese soldiers resulting in the sexual assault on Pearl and death of their mother, an arduous physical journey through the sea, and the dehumanising experience of confinement and interrogation at Angel Island Immigration Station. These gruesome experiences leave indelible marks of trauma and displacement on their bodies and minds, especially in the case of Pearl. In their new environments, they face more challenges, including cultural adjustments, language barriers, patriarchy, and racial prejudices. With its story beginning in the year 1937, *Shanghai Girls* explores the

bond between the two sisters as they grapple with these challenges while also delving into themes of human resilience, cultural identity, and immigrant experience.

The novel, as narrated by Pearl, begins within the private realms of the Chin house as the protagonists get ready to dine with their parents at "a square teakwood table," where they sit "at the exact same places" every day (See, *Shanghai Girls* 4). Their home, located "in the Hongkew district, just across Soochow Creek," signifies their moderately privileged status as "*kaoteng Huajen*—superior Chinese—who follow the religion of *ch'ung yang*: worshipping all things foreign." The location of the house just outside the International Settlement indicates an interstitial position, signifying the Chins' aspirations towards Western modernity while not letting go of their Chinese traditional customs. Although not officially part of the International Settlement, its proximity helps the family to participate in the cosmopolitan lifestyle of Shanghai City. Their affinity towards western culture is manifested in their westernised names, their "love of movies, bacon, and cheese." They take pride in their status as members of "the *bu-er-ch'iao-ya*—bourgeois class," prosperous enough to employ seven servants (10). The family home acts as a contact zone where traditional Chinese values clash and negotiate with the allure of Western modernity, reflecting not just the protagonists' internal identity struggles but also the broader societal changes of the period. With its juxtaposition of both Chinese and Western elements, the house physically manifests these transcultural trends. Its architectural design and decor, featuring a mixture of traditional Chinese elements as well as Western-style furniture and art deco fixtures, mirror the complex straddling between Western and Eastern influences that Shanghai was famous for at the time.

As Pearl reveals, the family uses a square teakwood dining table instead of the traditional round one, which symbolises wholeness and family connection. The missing "scrolls depicting the four seasons" hint at a family in transition towards modernity (4). Within the family, the parents' traditional ways coexist with their daughters' embrace of modern fashions, ideals, and lifestyles.

Pearl and May's sense of individualism and independence mainly stem from the financial freedom and confidence provided by their work as models for artists who paint the popular "beautiful-girl" calendars. However, their individualism and independence are not without limits. They are also simultaneously bound by their father's authoritative patriarchy as well as their mother's traditionalism. Their father, inspired by traditional Confucian values, reproaches Pearl for her smartness and education while doting on May for being pretty and feminine. Their mother, with her bound feet, antiquated ways, superstitions, and belief in astrology, stands as a remnant of the traditional feudal culture that dictated Chinese life before the Republic was established in 1912. Such a family background, in contrast with their modern and liberal spirits, causes the sisters to face conflicting expectations on their identity and role within the family. This internal conflict is quite apparent in the sisters' complex attempts at balancing societal and familial expectations with their personal desires. Their chosen occupation of modelling as "beautiful girls" for artists, which provides them with financial autonomy and a sense of liberty, however, makes them vulnerable to societal judgement and familial disapproval. Their father, influenced by traditional Chinese patriarchal culture and Confucian ideals, considers women's worth only in their obedience, beauty, and domesticity.

For Mr. Chin, his beautiful daughters are only a "capital" that will help him settle the debts he accumulated by gambling (*Shanghai Girls* 24). Pearl, being the eldest child, bears the brunt of his disapproval the most, with her father viewing her education and intelligence as a nuisance, declaring, "An educated woman is a worthless woman" (3). She struggles to reconcile her aspirations of education and independence with the traditional role she plays in the family. For instance, Pearl strongly feels a sense of duty towards May, as the traditional Confucian values dictate her as May's elder sister to "protect her, make sure she follows the right path and indulge her for the preciousness of her existence and place of love" in the family (9). On the other hand, May exhibits a more carefree demeanour and more readily accepts the independence and social scene that her work as a model affords her. She is also portrayed as a captivating and beautiful young girl who is quite aware of her appeal and is not hesitant to use it in her favour. Despite her playful exterior, she harbours a deep connection to her family and ultimately prioritises their interests over her own. The sisters' initial resistance to the marriage their father arranged for them, but eventual acceptance, illustrates this self-struggle. As Pearl admits, they "may look and act modern in many ways, but [they] can't escape what [they] are: obedient Chinese daughters" (22).

Despite their inclination towards individual freedom and modernity, the sisters are still bound by a strong sense of familial duty and traditional expectations, particularly relating to women's roles as daughters and wives. The pressure to conform to these expectations limits their personal freedom and individual aspirations. The sisters, however, attempt to circumvent these limitations by

embracing modern ways of life, fashion, makeup, and ideals. The beautiful-girl calendars they modelled for decorate their room within the house, reflecting their ambitions for individual freedom and professional pursuits. By hanging these calendars, Pearl and May celebrate their own identities as young, beautiful, and modern women of a rapidly transforming Shanghai. In this room, they prepare themselves for their modelling assignments, practising non-traditional beauty routines. They often choose to wear traditional *cheongsams* tailored according to modern fashion trends, pairing them with modern makeup and hairstyles (*Shanghai Girls* 10). Their bodies serve as the canvases on which they mix Chinese and Western beauty and fashion ideals, effectively also painting a transcultural identity for themselves.

Their room stands as a private sanctuary from the confining values and traditional societal expectations that limit their aspirations. Their room within the Chin house embodies Pearl and May's efforts to transcend their restrictive roles dictated by the society. Therefore, the Chin house simultaneously symbolises the constraints and limitations that the traditional patriarchal culture places on Chinese women's lives, as well as the sisters' efforts at rebellion. The house thus serves as a physical and symbolic representation of the ongoing conflicts between the past and present, traditional Chinese culture and Western modernity, as well as familial duty and individual aspirations.

On the other hand, Shanghai city beams as a space of opportunities, where Pearl and May are welcomed with abundant avenues for self-discovery and personal freedom. Shanghai, by the 1930s, was a flourishing city named among the largest in

the world, the epicentre of all economic activity in East Asia, as well as a cosmopolitan cultural hub often also considered the “Paris of Asia” (L. O. Lee 3). Due to its unique location between the Yangtze and Huangpu rivers, its role as a treaty port, and its unique urban environment made up of the International Settlement, the French Concession, and the Chinese City, it grew into a city of stark contrasts where East and West met and tradition and modernity clashed (Scheen). Lisa See portrays Shanghai as a multifaceted space where tradition, modernity, the East, the West, privilege, and poverty coexist in uneasy proximity. The sisters’ experiences in the city reveal the ways in which Shanghai becomes a site of transcultural exchange, forming a dynamic place that profoundly influences their personal identity.

The novel portrays Shanghai as a nexus between the "Old Chinese City," still adorned with temples and gardens, and the new city, embracing the gods of trade, wealth, industry, and sin. Shanghai features “*mo t’ien talou*—magical big buildings” instead of “swallowtail roofs and glazed tiles” and “European villas” instead of bamboo groves by the streams (See, *Shanghai Girls* 10–12). This unique architectural hybridity symbolises the city’s openness to foreign influences and its affinity towards Western modernity. The architectural duality also mirrors its social landscape, which is a mix of millionaires, beggars, prostitutes, foreigners, socialites, artists, and rickshaw pullers. See depicts Shanghai city as a contact zone of various cultures, where people from different nations and ethnicities coexist and engage with each other. The narrator Pearl describes Shanghai as a “fluid place, where the most interesting people mingle.” Pearl notes the presence of Russians, “British,

Americans, French or Japanese," all of whom lay their claim to the Paris of Asia. She is friends with an American girl named Betsy, with whom she frequently visits American coffee shops as well as Chinese eateries (*Shanghai Girls* 18).

In spite of their traditional upbringing, Pearl and May, as young women who earn their own living, enjoy the freedom of frequenting the streets and public spaces of Shanghai even at night. This freedom, despite their father's initial hesitation and protests, comes from various factors, including their independent spirits, the cosmopolitan culture of the city they inhabited, and the financial and cultural value of their work as "beautiful girls." Though considered scandalous by traditional Chinese people, including their parents, their profession as artists' models gives them access to Shanghai's elite social circles and vibrant nightlife. Their perceived financial independence affords them some degree of liberty to circumvent their father's patriarchal diktats.

As young women living in proximity to a vibrant cosmopolitan hub, Pearl and May are routinely exposed to various people and cultures, including Europeans and Americans. They frequently visit nightclubs like the "Casanova" with a diverse set of friends. including the artist Z.G. Li, family friend Tommy Hu, and the American woman Betsy Howell. They enjoy champagne and dance together, all activities that would be considered forbidden and scandalous by traditional Chinese families like the Chins (*Shanghai Girls* 16). Therefore, as the sisters navigate between their home and the public spaces of Shanghai city, they repeatedly oscillate between the Chinese customs of their family and the allure of western modernity. Such an intercultural exposure broadens their outlook on life, and they develop a

more cosmopolitan mindset as they traverse from their home to the city's streets, coffee shops, and even nightclubs. Interspersed between the traditional Chinese cultural expectations and the opportunities provided by the modern world, the girls develop an ambivalent, transcultural identity even before their fateful migration to America in the wake of their father's financial ruin and the escalating Japanese occupation of China. Shanghai acts not just as a physical setting where their early life formed but also as a symbolic space of change and hope, one that pushes them to reconcile and redefine their roles within their family as well as the rapidly hybridising society around them. Even after leaving, Shanghai remains in their thoughts, and the city's characteristic vibrancy, cultural hybridity, and social dynamics become the touchstones for their perception of self and community in Los Angeles.

> This isn't the China of my past—the busy streets of Shanghai, the beggars, the fun, the champagne, the money—but I see reminders of it here in the laughing tourists, the traditionally costumed shop owners, the smells that come from the cafés and restaurants, and the stunning woman at my side, who happens to be my sister. As we stroll, I catch glimpses of us in the shopwindows and I'm transported into our girlhoods: the way we dressed in our room and stared at our reflections and those of our beautiful-girl images that hung on the walls around us, the way we walked together along Nanking Road and smiled at ourselves in store windows, and the way Z.G. captured and painted our perfect selves. (*Shanghai Girls* 219–20)

Walter S. H. Lim observes that in See's portrayal, Shanghai, during the 1930s, is a space of cosmopolitanism and cultural exchange that is abruptly disrupted by the violent Japanese occupation. He further writes that the Sino-Japanese War is not just a historical backdrop for the sisters' migration to the United States but also signifies "the event that, refusing to be erased from personal and communal memory, haunts the overseas Chinese" (15). Shanghai thus remains as a symbol of the emotional and cultural ties to their past, representing a complex mixture of loss, nostalgia, and identity that pervades their experiences in America.

Pearl and May's loss of their city Shanghai and their subsequent migration to America are caused not just by the escalating Japanese invasion but also by a combination of personal events that include the loss of their home and fortune due to their father's gambling debts, their arranged marriage to the sons of a wealthy Chinese American businessman, threats from their father's creditors, and the escalating Japanese attack on China. During their journey, they face numerous challenges, including the death of their mother and Pearl's sexual assault by Japanese soldiers. While the physical journey is traumatic enough, they are faced with even further hardship upon arrival in America, as they are taken to the Angel Island Immigration Station for interrogation.

In Chinese American immigration history, the Angel Island Immigration Station occupies a pivotal space. Often known as a West Coast alternative to Ellis Island, which largely catered to European immigrants, Angel Island was the largest entry point for thousands of immigrants, predominantly from Asia, between 1910 and 1940. But unlike Ellis Island, which largely welcomed the white European

immigrants, Angel Island became infamous as a site of dehumanisation and detention, aimed at implementing the discriminatory immigration policies like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Separated from mainland San Francisco by a forty-five-minute ferry ride, the station ensured not only that undesirable immigrants were kept out of the American shores but also ensured racial segregation among the detainees by separating them in ferryboats as well as in the accommodation quarters. The differences in facilities between the European and Oriental quarters revealed the biases of the administration. As Erika Lee and Judy Young write, the immigration station "was designed with exclusion, not admission, in mind" and that "Chinese were singled out for long detentions and intense interrogations to prove their legal right to enter the country" (16).

For Pearl and May, Angel Island emerges as an important spatial landmark in their journey, representing a site of transforming meanings throughout their stay there, changing from a place of fear and exclusion to one of hope and resilience. Initially, the island acts as a borderland space, which forms a physical and emotional barrier of exclusion that separates them from both their past in China and their future in America. This atmosphere of exclusion and confinement is clearly visible in Lisa See's depiction of the island in her novel. As soon as they land, Pearl and May along with other Chinese passengers, are segregated from other ethnicities like whites, Russians, Koreans, and Japanese, and taken to a medical facility, where they are humiliatingly subjected to physical examination to check for "loathsome parasitic diseases" such as "trachoma, hookworm, filariasis, and liver fluke" (See, *Shanghai Girls* 90). These dehumanising inspections of their medical conditions are not

simply about their physical health; these invasive assessments become a stark glimpse into how their Chinese bodies would be perceived and judged in America. Moreover, the physical examinations further traumatise Pearl, who has already suffered brutal physical violations at the hands of Japanese soldiers. These repeated violations completely disrupt Pearl's sense of control over her body, also deeply impacting her agency and selfhood. Before these incidents, Pearl's and her sister's bodies were presented as symbols of beauty and modernity, with their work as artists' models celebrating their physical form. In Shanghai, they used their bodies as canvases to express their evolving identities, as well as a symbol of their independence and aspirations. However, later, the assault on Pearl's body transforms it into a symbol of trauma, pain, and vulnerability. Her body itself becomes a site of violence, a brutal reminder of the losses they suffered at the hands of fate and history, including their home, family, and future. Her body is marked as 'other' disrupting her sense of self and belonging. This othering is further reinforced by the medical examinations at Angel Island, as the bodies of Pearl and May, along with those of their fellow inmates, are subjected to humiliation and judgement based on racialised and gendered stereotypes.

Their immigrant bodies are considered undesirable, diseased, and a source of corruption. These physical examinations are used by the American state to reinforce cultural and racial hierarchies by controlling and classifying immigrants' bodies. Pearl and May's experience represents the larger historical context of Chinese immigration in America during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when anti-Asian racism and discrimination were systemically and blatantly enforced in the

United States through anti-Chinese legislation. The treatment of the sisters' bodies illustrates the ways in which racialised and gendered bodies are vulnerable in the context of migration and cultural displacement. Pearl's experiences with this corporeal violence show how her body turns into a battleground where the forces of race, gender, and power collide and how various forms of oppression and control shape and govern her life. This violence, including her rape by Japanese soldiers, as well as the invasive medical examinations at Angel Island illustrate how various kinds of control and oppression shape the lives of Chinese immigrant women like her, in profoundly personal ways. Her body is not a passive medium, it is a site where racial and gendered discrimination, as well as her precarious immigration status are acutely felt. These experiences leave enduring marks on both Pearl's body and mind, making them both sites of trauma and displacement. Pearl's personal journey within this novel focuses greatly on her attempts to regain some amount of control over her body and identity in the aftermath of these brutal violations.

Pearl's trauma of being trapped and dehumanised is further aggravated by the interstitial spatial setting of the immigration station, isolated from both China and America, creating a sense of uncertainty about their futures. The claustrophobic imagery used by the author to describe the Chinese women's dormitory reveals the feelings of isolation, scrutiny, and entrapment that Pearl and May experience along with their fellow detainees:

> Rows of bunks two across and three high are connected to one another by iron poles attached to the ceiling and floor. There are no "beds" to sleep on, just wire mesh. This means that the frames can be folded up to create, but

> apparently no one wants to sit on the floor. The distance between bunks are so tight that at first glance I can see I won't be able to extend my arm without hitting the one above. (*Shanghai Girls* 91)

The women are "herded" into rooms of interrogation and cross-examined for hours with questions that are often personally invasive, repetitive, and intended to make them contradict themselves. The questioning and the seemingly endless time they are held at the island take a psychological toll on the detainees, some of them ending up dead by suicide. Pearl herself admits to feeling "locked in and trapped," and feelings of fear, anxiety, and powerlessness fill their minds as they await their fate (95). Pearl compares this feeling of drudgery to being trapped in "the afterworld," and in prison (106). "Between the women detainees and the interrogators," Pearl and May learn at the island "that America doesn't want" them (109). Their detention, prolonged for months, creates a sense of alienation both from their homeland and the host country they hope to enter. Lisa See's stark description of Angel Island, and the conditions in which Chinese immigrants, particularly women like Pearl and May, were kept in, contest the very idea of the United States as a nation built by and for immigrants. As Lee and Yung further write,

> Angel Island's history complicates our understandings of America as a celebratory "nation of immigrants." It forces us to ask these essential and timely questions: Is the United States a "nation of immigrants" that welcomes newcomers and helps them to achieve their dreams? Or is it a "gate-keeping nation" that builds fences and detention centers to keep out

> certain groups of immigrants who are perceived as undesirable and dangerous aliens? (21)

However, as the time of Pearl and May's detention on the island progresses, it transforms into a training ground where the sisters practice their adaptability and survival skills. The author highlights how, despite the challenges faced, Pearl and May draw strength from their bond to rise above the dehumanising experiences and fight for their survival. The revelation of May's secret pregnancy and the eventual birth of the baby Joy add to the complexities of their experience on the island. With immigration officials scrutinising every aspect of their lives, their efforts to hide May's out-of-wedlock pregnancy by making everyone believe it was Pearl who was pregnant intensify their already precarious position. The pregnancy causes some dramatic shift in their relationship dynamics, forcing Pearl to take on a protective, maternal stance by agreeing to adopt the child as her own to protect her sister from shame and societal condemnation. This shared secret responsibility reinforces the sisters' sense of loyalty, solidarity, and adaptability, which become important for their survival at Angel Island as well as their upcoming new life in America.

As mentioned above, the birth of the baby girl Joy adds a further layer of complexity to the sisters' lives, particularly as Pearl takes on the role of Joy's official mother, while May remains the biological mother. This arrangement symbolises the complexities of family bonds under the pressures of migration and survival. The circumstances behind Joy's birth and adoption by Pearl highlight the necessity of adaptation and negotiation that characterise the immigrant experience. As Pearl and

May take up the dual roles of mother and aunt simultaneously, their daughter Joy emerges as a symbol of their transcultural identity.

Joy's birth on Angel Island places her literally at the intersection between two worlds, making her a symbolic fusion of both Chinese and American identities. Possibly the only bond of blood they had remaining in their family, the baby signifies the continuity between the sisters' past in China and their future in America. Further, being born on Angel Island and hence entitled to American citizenship, the baby paves the way for the sisters' entry into the country. Therefore, the baby represents hope and optimism for their future life in America, which is reflected in the American name they finally select for her: 'Joy'. The island thus finally redefines itself as a place of hope and resilience, as the sisters are ultimately allowed entry into mainland America, where they can begin to rebuild their new lives. As they assume their roles jointly as mother and aunt of Joy, the liminal space of Angel Island becomes a catalyst for the disruption and reconfiguration of their identities and familial roles.

Once they gain entry into the United States, the sisters find themselves in the crowded streets of Los Angeles's Chinatown, where their husbands' family, the Louies, live. In this phase, they encounter the two contrasting spaces of Chinatown and the newly opened China City, the former housing their residential quarters and the latter being their place of work. These spaces mirror their erstwhile home and public spaces of Shanghai, yet they are quite opposed to the bustling, cosmopolitan metropolis that they left behind. In Chinatown, Pearl and May find themselves confined to the crowded and cramped living quarters of the Louie family. Pearl

describes the interiors as “poor, dirty and shabby,” without any “photographs, paintings or calendars,” and having filthy windows without any coverings (128). For Pearl and May, the dramatic contrast between their expectations and the reality of their new living conditions in Los Angeles Chinatown presents a stark reality. The cramped and dilapidated apartments of their parents-in-law present a complete departure from the relative comfort and elegance they were used to in Shanghai. The crowded and cramped nature of their living quarters limits their personal space and autonomy. Contrary to their previous life in Shanghai, where they enjoyed a great degree of privilege, liberty and privacy, Pearl and May now find themselves trapped in a confining place where they feel vulnerable and exposed. Further, their inability to display personal artefacts like their parents’ photographs, paintings, or other decorations in the Louie household further aggravates the sisters’ sense of displacement and alienation.

The lack of photographs or any other personal elements also points to the weight of secrets that Chinese immigrant families are forced to carry in the ‘gold mountain.’ Most families in Chinatown had “paper sons,” and therefore, they had to refrain from displaying family photographs or any other articles that may betray their secrets to the “immigration inspectors” (136). The phenomenon of “paper sons” refers to a trend of illegal immigration of young Chinese men, prevalent during the period when the Chinese Exclusion Act was in effect. These men, seeking their fortune in the United States, circumvented these discriminatory immigration laws by falsely claiming to be the children of Chinese Americans who were already citizens.

As Pearl's fellow-detainee at Angel Island explains,

> Suppose a Chinese man born in America travels to China to get married. When he comes back to America, he tells the authorities that his wife ad a baby… So this man, who is a citizen of the United States, is given a paper saying that he has a new son, who is also a citizen because of his father. But remember, this son was never born. He only exists on paper. So now the man has a paper-son slot to sell. The man waits ten years, twenty years. He then sells the paper—the slot—to a young man in China, who adopts his new family name and comes to America. He's not a real son. He's only a paper son. The immigration officials here on Angel Island will try to trick him into admitting the truth. If he's caught, he'll be sent back to China. (110)

In fact, it is later revealed in the novel that Pearl's husband Sam, who she had thought was Old Man Louie's elder son, is also a paper son, thereby making her residency in the country uncertain, which further contributes to her alienation from her new life. Pearl's sense of displacement is further aggravated by the traditional gender roles she was expected to fulfil—including her roles as Joy's primary caregiver and a subordinate to her mother-in-law in performing household chores. These gender roles initially restrict her mobility and confine her to the domestic sphere, in stark contrast to her active life in Shanghai, where she frequented the public spaces and enjoyed a greater degree of social freedom.

Pearl's confinement to the household is a direct result of the conventional gender roles that she is expected to fulfil as a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law,

according to traditional Chinese customs. Ironically, Pearl seems to have enjoyed greater liberty during her life in China than in the United States, contrary to the popular perception of the former as a traditional society and the latter as a more liberated one. Pearl's experience underscores the complex intersections of gender, culture, and class in shaping the experiences of immigrant women. Even in a supposedly more liberated society like America, cultural expectations and gender roles can severely limit women's autonomy and agency. On the other hand, her sister May is asked to participate in the family's businesses in the new China City, which provides her with the opportunity to leave the confines of the house and interact with the larger community. Being married to the actual legitimate son of the family, who is also an American citizen by birth, May's status of residency in the country is not as threatened as that of her elder sister. This fact, combined with her greater access to opportunities outside the Louie household, enables May to acclimate herself better with the new surroundings than Pearl. Pearl, however, caught between the claustrophobic interiors of the Louie house, her mind-numbing duties within the household, and her precarious status of residency, feels isolated and trapped in her surroundings.

> I stay home with my mother-in-law and Joy; my sister returns at the end of every day with tales of people with names like Peanut and Dolly… I've always been the first to discover new things but now May's the one who reports about the shops and stores and fun things that are being planned at China City… It bothers me that she gets to be a part of the excitement, while I have to stay with my mother-in-law and Joy in the grim apartment, where

> the dust floating in the air leaves me feeling suffocated and dizzy. I tell myself this is just temporary, like Angel Island was temporary, and soon—somehow—May and I will escape. (137)

The cramped space of the Louie household in old Chinatown represents a microcosm of the challenges faced by Chinese immigrants, especially women, in America. The limited space within the house reveals the socio-economic realities of immigrant life, with even relatively prosperous Chinese families like that of the Louies having to live in overcrowded conditions due to limited space and discriminatory housing policies of the state. Pearl's feeling of suffocation and dizziness in the dusty apartment shows the psychological effect of such dilapidated living conditions on the inhabitants. Pearl, finding herself trapped within the confines of the Louie household, feels extremely limited in her opportunities and feels desperate to escape.

Although initially restricted to the Louie household, Pearl's services are eventually sought at the family's businesses in the newly opened China City. The place China City described in the novel was an actual historical space in Los Angeles that opened in 1938. Developed "under the auspices of Christine Sterling, a socialite who had created Olvera Street, a touristy Mexican marketplace just off the old Spanish Plaza," is what Lisa See herself writes in her nonfiction family history titled *On Gold Mountain.* See further reveals that "China City pandered unabashedly to Chinese stereotypes, evoking the 'exotic' atmosphere of a Chinese village… enclosed within a miniature 'Great Wall of China,'" and with its alleyways "filled with leftover sets from *The Good Earth*" (*On Gold Mountain*, chap. 13).

In *Shanghai Girls*, See uses this China City as the setting where her protagonists Pearl and May attempt to rebuild their lives in Los Angeles. Pearl's impressions of the place mirror See's own descriptions of China City in her earlier non-fiction family history. It was a tourist-oriented replica of what Americans deem as Chinese culture, commodifying traditions and using them as spectacles for consumption by the American public. Pearl observes that the whole space reflected its architect's "total lack of understanding of [their] culture, history and taste," resembling not the real China, but the stereotyped China that was portrayed in Hollywood movies (146-7). Pearl, May, and other members of the community had to perform cultural stereotypes and act as the representatives of 'authentic' Chinese culture. This included dressing up in traditional *cheong-sams*, speaking "wantee-chop-suey English," and presenting Chinese cultural artefacts in manners that satisfy the orientalist fantasies of majority Americans (156). In short, China City is a fabricated simulation of an idealised and simplified version of a Chinese town. Despite her mental criticisms and reservations, Pearl is forced to participate in this performance to sell their merchandise and earn a living. She initially struggles with the performative nature of her labour, having to present a distorted version of her cultural identity for meagre wages. This vastly contrasts with her past work of modelling in Shanghai, in which her sister and she were celebrated for their beauty and modernity instead of being exoticised and fetishised. While the environment of China City is a constructed and performative replica of her heritage, it also exposes Pearl to the ways in which Chinese culture intersects with the dominant American culture, reminding her of the negotiations she must make as an immigrant.

Lisa See portrays China City as a sort of heterotopic transcultural space situated within the white-dominated American city of Los Angeles. A distinct space within the urban environment of Los Angeles, it is deliberately designed to be visually and culturally different, with its architecture and decor featuring the Great Wall, pagodas, lanterns, and other traditional Chinese items, creating an impression of exoticism. It simultaneously gives visibility to the Chinese Americans who work there as well as reinforces their separateness from the mainstream American population, who come there as spectators. The space becomes a site of contradictions, being both real and unreal, authentic and inauthentic—while the people and artefacts are true and authentic, the culture and traditions represented there are curated and commodified to satisfy the white gaze.

The space of China City is therefore an apt representation of Chinese American life within the white-dominated American city, highlighting the marginalisation, cultural commodification, and systemic racial hierarchy that mark the daily immigrant experience. At the same time, it also acts as a contact zone where the Chinese immigrants interact and engage in cultural exchange with American visitors. Though an inaccurate representation, China City relies on Chinese traditions, cultural symbols and aesthetics, blended with the American spirit of consumerism and commodification. This blending of cultures creates a transcultural space that is neither entirely Chinese nor American. The Chinese workers, including Pearl and May, are required to navigate the intersection of their cultural heritage and the American context. For instance, Pearl and May wear their authentic *cheongsams,* the same ones they wore for their ‘beautiful-girl’ modelling

assignments in Shanghai, to perform their roles in China City. Coming from the transcultural environment of Shanghai, and despite their initial struggles, Pearl and May blend into their role as cultural intermediaries, curating elements from their heritage for the American spectators. This reflects the fluidity of their transcultural identities as they learn to negotiate their cultural identities with the demands of performance, adapting their cultural expressions to survive in a hybrid environment.

Despite the artificiality of spaces like China City and New Chinatown, Pearl and May selectively engage with the white gaze, using their work as an opportunity to explore more greener pastures. May, driven by her passion for Hollywood, pursues her career as a background actor in the movies, eventually taking over a business that supplies Chinese props and extra actors for Hollywood movies. Pearl also negotiates with her father-in-law to let her work outside of China City and finally lands a job at a department store where she is paid much better. She is also later able to negotiate better wages for herself and Sam for their work in China City. Thus, for Pearl and May, China City emerges as a space of duality—as both a reminder of their marginalisation with respect to the larger American society and as a site of survival and opportunity. China City provides economic and social opportunities for the two sisters, who utilise these opportunities to build a better future for themselves as well as their daughter Joy. Despite its performative nature, China City emerges as a site of both survival and alienation, where their resilience and transcultural selves evolve in response to the complex interplay of power, identity, and representation.

The theme of performance within transcultural spaces is further explored in *China Dolls,* which delves deeper into the fictional, less-charted cultural realms of Chinese American nightclubs that were popular in American cities such as San Francisco during the 1930s and 1940s. Published in 2014, the novel follows the dreams and struggles of three young women named Grace, Helen, and Ruby as they try to make a place for themselves in the harshly competitive glamour and entertainment circuits of the 1930s-40s American nightclubs. Being members of historically persecuted minority communities of the country, 'making a place' for themselves in the white-dominated entertainment industry becomes an equally important project for the three of them, as the seemingly far-fetched dream becomes their way to transcend the repressive domestic, cultural, and social spaces in which they grew up. Like China City in *Shanghai Girls*, which reveals a complex, heterotopic space where a Chinese American identity is both commodified and negotiated at the same time, the setting of Chinese American nightclubs in *China Dolls* reveals a complex space that simultaneously objectifies as well as provides the women protagonists opportunities to navigate their identities through performance.

The novel *China Dolls* begins in October 1938 with the narrative voice of Grace Lee, a Chinese-origin girl who has had a very American upbringing in her hometown of Plain City, Ohio, where hers was the only family of Asian ancestry. Growing up facing physical violence from her father at home and racial prejudice outside home, Grace runs away to San Francisco in pursuit of a career in dance and entertainment. At San Francisco's famous Chinatown, she meets Helen Fong, daughter of a prominent Chinese immigrant family there, who offers to take her to

Forbidden City, the Chinese American nightclub where Grace looks to find work as a dancer. Grace and Helen later encounter the third protagonist of the novel, Ruby Tom, at Forbidden City. In this novel, Lisa See portrays Chinatown as a complex and paradoxical space, which holds varied meanings for its three protagonists, Grace, Helen, and Ruby. As someone who grew up in a white-majority town, Grace had never been to Chinatown before, and therefore for her, it turns out to be an unfamiliar and unsettling place.

> At the corner of California Street and Grant Avenue, two peculiar-looking multiple-storied edifices with green-glazed tile roofs sat like guards: Sing Chong Bazaar and Sing Fat Bazaar. What crazy names! Behind the big plate-glass windows were things I'd never seen before: Chinese furniture, silks, and vases. Then I turned onto Grant and into another world. Coiling dragons painted in bright green, red, and gold decorated the streetlamps. Eaves curled skyward. I passed markets with produce stacked in baskets right on the sidewalk and restaurants advertising chop suey—whatever that was. And the smells! I couldn't tell if they were good or bad—just odd. (12–13)

The sights, sounds, and smells of Chinatown all feel alien to her, and she feels as though she had "just disembarked from a boat in Hong Kong, Canton, or Shanghai" (13). This outlook is in alignment with Upton's view of Chinatowns as "imagined spaces of Chineseness abroad," where the Self and the Other "are constructed and performed as everyday life" (iii, 87). As is evident from the above descriptions, Grace initially observes Chinatown with the stereotypically "dominant gaze" of a white American tourist, one that she most likely developed as a result of years of

exposure to the prejudiced, orientalist, and racialised representation of her ancestral homeland's culture in popular American cinema (Russell 244). Despite having a Chinese face herself, the overwhelming number of Chinese bodies and faces she encounters upon arrival in Chinatown unnerves her. Grace's first instinct upon seeing Chinatown and its people is to 'other' them, to separate them from herself; she does not even realise that her own face looks a lot like theirs. For her American self, the names of the shops she reads on the streets, like "Sing Chong Bazaar and Sing Fat Bazaar" are "crazy names," things like Chinese furniture, silks, and vases are exotic curiosities, and the smells emanating from the Chinese restaurants are "just odd" (See China Dolls 12–13). However, like *Shanghai Girls'* Pearl and May in China City, Grace also finds in San Francisco Chinatown a place of refuge and opportunity, where she can find work and pursue her dreams. Further, as she spends more time there and forms meaningful relationships within the Chinese American community, she begins to appreciate the place more for its cultural significance and sense of community. It is also the place where she first encounters and begins to connect with her ancestral culture and heritage. Helen, and to an extent even Ruby, become bridges connecting Grace to her ethno-cultural roots in the Chinese American community.

From encountering Chinese food and chopsticks for the first time to having absolutely no clue of the traditional ways of life followed by the Chinese ethnic community there, Grace is an absolute misfit within the space of Chinatown, even though her face reveals her Chinese heritage. If Grace teaches Helen how to do tap dance, it is Helen who endeavours to introduce Grace to the Chinese ways of life,

from teaching her to eat with chopsticks to telling her about the traditional customs followed by the Chinatown community. The meeting of Grace and Helen within the space of Chinatown thus helps both of these young women to discover newer parts of their identity that they had hitherto kept suppressed. While Grace triggers Helen's acculturation into the dominant culture from which she had so far been largely insulated, Helen helps in initiating Grace's reverse acculturation into her ancestral culture. Chinatown thus emerges as the contact zone between the two cultures that Grace and Helen represented, namely, the mainstream American culture and traditional Chinese culture, respectively. Thus, for Grace, Chinatown becomes a space that enables her to reconcile her Chinese and American identities and start a new life with an enriched sense of self.

For Helen Fong, the second protagonist of the novel, who grew up in an American version of a traditional Chinese compound, Chinatown is a familiar but confining space. She led a rather dull and mundane life working at a telephone exchange in Chinatown. Every morning and evening, she was "walked" there and back home by her brother Monroe (17). As the only daughter in a blatantly patriarchal and prominent Chinese American family there, Helen's mobility within and outside of Chinatown was severely confined. She had no permission to go anywhere alone without being chaperoned by her brother, nor was she allowed to stay outside of home past the curfew time set by her father. All her movements were constantly monitored by the Chinatown community, and any misstep would immediately be reported to her father. She was also expected to always prioritise her family's honour and interests above her own desires. The constant surveillance of

her movements and the pressure to conform to the traditional gender roles and expectations, limiting her personal aspirations and autonomy, contributed to Helen's feelings of confinement. She compares her life in the "traditional Chinese compound right in the heart of Chinatown," to the futile lives of the crickets kept caged by the wives and concubines of the ancient and mediaeval Chinese emperors, to alleviate their loneliness (18). It is later revealed in the novel that Helen had recently lost her child and been widowed after having been part of an arranged marriage her family had set up for her with a man in China. Her husband and his entire family, including their baby, had been killed in an attack by the Japanese. After Helen had managed to escape back to her own family in the US, however, her family viewed her as an embarrassment. Her recent status as a widow further compounded her predicament, as she was expected to live a sombre life, avoid any inappropriate behaviour, and prioritise her family's reputation and interests over her personal desires. Lisa See introduces Helen to the readers as a submissive daughter of a traditional Chinatown family who was brought up to adhere to traditional Chinese values, which included filial piety, obedience, loyalty to family, modesty, and belief in fate. She always felt lonely, even within the bustling space of her family's home, where three generations of her relatives also lived. Getting "out of the compound" and, if possible, out of Chinatown, even if only temporarily, becomes Helen's method of coping with her grief and frustrations, and her meeting with Grace in Chinatown (who also had left her home) presents that opportunity.

For Ruby Tom, the third protagonist of the novel, Chinatown becomes a place of refuge, where she can hide her true identity and escape persecution. Helen

and Grace meet Ruby at the nightclub as they await their turn for an audition. She introduces herself as Ruby Tom, Tom being a Chinese family name. But it is later revealed that her real name is Kimiko Fukutomi and that she is, in fact, a Japanese American who came to San Francisco from Hawaii to make a name in the dance and entertainment circles of the city. Ruby's family was almost nomadic, moving from Los Angeles, where she was born, to Long Beach and later Hawaii, never really settling down at one place for too long. As such, Ruby was not entirely attached to any one city as her hometown, but she had a clear conviction that the United States of America was her home country, unlike her parents, who wanted to move all the way back home to Japan.

At this juncture, Kimiko Fukutomi's performance of Chineseness under the disguise of Ruby Tom should also be read in the context of the ongoing Sino-Japanese war, in which her ancestral land, Japan's actions in China, had attracted global scrutiny and criticism. Her pretence as Chinese, an identity she deems as more "practical," must be understood not only as a way for her to find work at the Chinese American nightclubs, but also to escape the prejudice and hostility that could come with identification as Japanese amongst Chinatown residents (52). Ruby's ethnic identity was merely a coincidental aspect of her life, with her primary focus being on thriving in a hostile environment and achieving her dreams despite all obstacles. Her motives in life admittedly were to "float above the noise of the world, *live* in [her] body, and be seen as anything other than just Japanese" (82). Chinatown thus became a space that provided her with a conducive environment to

choose a different identity, something she admits she was good at: “Even here in Chinatown, most people don’t see me as different” (50).

Chinatown thus provides a multifaceted communal and cultural hub for Grace, Helen, and Ruby, while simultaneously representing a space of confinement, where tradition and surveillance shape their lives. It oscillates between being a site of belonging and alienation, opportunity and confinement, as well as a site of transcultural negotiations and identity formation. At the same time, the nightclub Forbidden City offers them a spatial environment that embodies glamour, artistic gratification, and transcultural performance. Much like the China City portrayed in *Shanghai Girls*, Forbidden City here presents a nuanced, ambivalent space where Chinese American identity is simultaneously celebrated and commodified. The nightclub allows the protagonists to explore their individual selves and pursue their ambitions of a career in dance while simultaneously grappling with the objectifying gaze of their white male audience and limitations of racialised stereotypes. In addition to Chinatown, Forbidden City remains the central site in the novel, where the friendship and personalities of Grace, Helen, and Ruby develop.

In her analysis of the novel, Melody Yunzi Li posits the nightclub as a liminal space where the contradictions of Chinese-American identity are represented by acting as a site for its participants to reconfigure their own identities, as well as to “perform the expected stereotypical Asian images from Western perspectives” (1). The liminality of the nightclub space in this novel works at different spatial levels. The foremost and most obvious of these is the physical location of Forbidden City, on the border street that separates Chinatown from the

rest of the city of San Francisco. This in-between location of the nightclub is not simply coincidental in the narrative. Here, it must also be noted that Forbidden City, which features in the novel, is not a fictional place but a real historical nightclub opened in 1938 by a Chinese American named Charlie Low on 363, Sutter Street, San Francisco. This spatial location, in-between Chinatown and Union Square, a prime public plaza in the city of San Francisco, might be considered instrumental in the Chinese American nightclub's popularity and success, as it enabled a unique cross-cultural interaction between its Chinese American performers and the largely white audiences. Its location just outside Chinatown made it comfortably accessible to both its Chinese American performers as well as the majority of white American spectators (Kamiya).

In addition to this spatial liminality, nightclubs like Forbidden City are also situated on the 'borderland' with respect to the traditional socio-cultural milieu of early twentieth-century Chinatown. Even though the nightclub could be seen as part of the Chinese ethnic spaces in San Francisco, being run and staffed by Chinese Americans, it was actually seen as a forbidden place by the larger Chinatown community, as indicated by its own name. The traditional Confucian morals and codes of conduct followed by most of the middle- and upper-middle-class families of Chinatown conditioned its residents to view nightclubs as taboo or *unspeakable* spaces. This is evident from the reactions Grace receives from some of the Chinatown inhabitants when she asks them for directions to a nightclub:

"Won't you get in trouble?" …

"They're barely better than bars —"

> "No one wants them in the neighborhood—"
>
> "My dad says they're just a rat's hair above a speakeasy—" (*China Dolls* 14).

The activity of visiting nightclubs was seen as a distinctly American or '*lo fan'* attribute and thus frowned upon by the traditional elders in the Chinese families. Working as a performer in one of the nightclubs would inevitably invite the anger of one's family, as seen in the case of Helen in the novel. Therefore, nightclubs like Forbidden City were truly forbidden for the young Chinese American residents of Chinatown during the initial years of their establishment. Therefore, Forbidden City occupied a 'borderland' position with respect to Chinatown not only physically but also socially and culturally.

According to Chicana American theorist Gloria Anzaldúa, a "[b]orderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary," which "is in a constant state of transition" and is inhabited by "the prohibited and forbidden" (3). Borderlands may be understood as places where different cultures and races share living and working spaces, where the lines dividing classes start to blur, and whose inhabitants straddle and play with multiple identities and subjectivities. This border position of the nightclub makes it an important transcultural space where Chinese American culture mingled and negotiated with the dominant white American culture, in possibly one of the earliest instances of such interaction. As Barbara Lum notes, the rise of Chinese American nightclubs, including Forbidden City at that point of American cultural history, signified the "gradual acceptance of Chinese American culture by the larger white

community in the first half of the twentieth century—as well as the growing acculturation of the Chinese to American life…" Lisa See's representation of Forbidden City in *China Dolls* aptly illustrates this idea of the Chinese American nightclub as what Lum calls "a hotbed of American culture" (212). It is evident that Forbidden City, like most other Chinese nightclubs of the period, thrived on the reinforcement of Asian cultural stereotypes and the exotic image of the Orient. While the artists were Chinese, the routines they performed were American, mostly influenced by Hollywood movies. They combined European, American, and Latin styles of dance and performed them in tune with American popular music. Their spectators were mostly curious white Americans, often soldiers, who considered their performances as 'novelty acts' and who came to experience the exotic aspects of the Orient repackaged in a routine familiar to their dominant gaze. Star performers of the club were nicknamed Chinese versions of popular Hollywood entertainers, like Eddie Wu in the novel, who was advertised as "Chinese Fred Astaire" (See, *China Dolls* 21).

At the same time, it is hard to deny that the space of the nightclub also severely sexualised and objectified the bodies of its female performers. These young women had to largely conform to the image of "China dolls" popularised by the few Hollywood films that featured Asian characters at the time. As Helen narrates in the novel, "We twirled our parasols and tilted our heads just so. We looked exquisite. We looked delicate and breakable—like dolls, like little China dolls." They also showed off their arms and legs and their singing and dancing skills, shattering stereotypes that regarded Chinese as "bowlegged and clumsy" and

Chinatown women as demure and submissive, who would not even meet anyone's eyes (68-9). However, at the same time, they also performed the opposite stereotype of considering Asian women as overtly sexualised. They wore western clothes, "miniature tuxedos—collars and ties, top hats, gloves, black opera hose and little sequined corsets" for their performances, and flaunted their exquisite ethnic *cheongsams* as they entertained their admirers in between the shows (72-5).

The performance of such contradictory images reinforces the transcultural space that the nightclub occupied within San Francisco's cultural landscape during that period. For instance, the eclectic mixture of Western and Chinese attire that the performers chose to wear itself illustrates the complex transcultural interplays within this space. This interesting choice of apparel was not meant simply for aesthetic allure. Rather, the performers' choices of clothing, from the Western tuxedos to the traditional Chinese *cheongsams,* highlight the cultural tensions inherent in their position as Chinese American performers. They had to engage themselves in a delicate balance of sometimes indulging in self-stereotyping while at other times dismantling the dominant perceptions. Sometimes they embodied the stereotypical "China doll" image created by Hollywood, while at other times they would employ their boldness and dancing skills to shatter the images of clumsiness and docility. In addition to this, through the "tactical mimicry" of dominant American cultural icons and styles, these performers catapulted themselves into the cultural imaginary of mainstream American society (Dey and Teasdale 2–3). The cultural significance thus attained is evident in the fact that the real Forbidden City

was at the time visited by many celebrities, including actor Ronald Reagan, who later went on to become the 40th President of the United States (“Ronald Reagan”).

While performing ethnic stereotypes about themselves, the nightclub performers also crossed some of the boundaries and limits set for them by their own ethnic traditions as well as the discriminating mainstream society. The performers there, mostly second- and subsequent-generation immigrants who were inclined to music and dance, saw working at the nightclubs as a way to escape the confined moulds of traditional ‘Chineseness’ dictated by their elders (Lum 211-212). Dancing at the nightclubs also meant they could move beyond dishwashing, noodle making, laundry work, or manual labour, which were the only jobs even college-educated Asian Americans could find during that period.

In the novel, Helen, Grace, and Ruby embody this new generation of Asian American youth who aspire to challenge traditional rigid norms and surpass the limitations imposed on their lives by their families and society, even if only marginally. This is especially true in the case of Helen, as the nightclub is so much more of an alien space for her than for Grace and Ruby, who have always envisaged a career in performance for themselves. Helen finds the nightclub unfamiliar not only due to its physical distance from her familiar Chinatown locales but also because it lies on the periphery of her relatively affluent and insulated socio-cultural milieu. While Helen, who has in the past “danced the fox-trot” at a nightclub in Shanghai, did not actually consider nightclubs as immoral, the vestiges of her traditional upbringing under the strict surveillance of her patriarchal family and also the inhibitions related to her current status as a young widow contribute to

her hesitation in entering Forbidden City. This is why, when she follows Grace, enters the nightclub, and ends up auditioning there for the position of a dancer, Helen says that she has "leapt so far out of [her] cage—out of [*herself*]" that it felt like she was the one who was lost and Grace was now leading the way (See, *China Dolls* 18). See's spatial description of the nightclub as Helen enters and scans through its interiors reflects Helen's doubts and indecision, as well as intrigue at this point. While Grace eagerly enters and merges into the crowd of aspirants gathered there, Helen takes her time scrutinising each and every nook and cranny of the space that would soon become Forbidden City. In spite of her reservations, what finally convinces Helen to stay, apart from her companion's enthusiasm, is the realisation that staying there was "a lot better than the Chinese Telephone Exchange," her second cage outside of home (20). For Helen, working at Forbidden City therefore affords the possibilities of getting out of the 'compound,' which is like a cage to her, meeting new people outside of the familiar realms of her home, dressing up to look pretty, and learning new skills like dancing and singing. All of these were activities forbidden by her family and the patriarchal community she grew up in, and Forbidden City, true to its name, provides her the space to experiment with her life and discover an individual identity and subjectivity outside of her family. After months of working in Forbidden City, Helen's eventual decision to leave home and accompany Eddie to Los Angeles shows how much she had changed since she first started working at Forbidden City. Her affair with a white man there, subsequent pregnancy, and later marriage with Eddie further demonstrate her rebellion against her family's traditional values, as well as her willingness to take risks to pursue her own desires. Therefore, in the case of Helen,

the transcultural performance space of the nightclub finally frees her from a life of mourning and dependence on her patriarchal family and helps her rebuild a family and make friends of her own. It becomes the space where she first finds a sense of belonging and where she first acquires the courage to make decisions about her own life. It is also the space that enables her, albeit after many upheavals and betrayals, to finally move on from her past trauma.

For Grace and Ruby, Forbidden City plays an important role in shaping their identities, dreams, and survival as individual young Asian women in early-to-mid-twentieth-century America. The nightclub offers them not just a stage to gratify their artistic selves and earn a living but also the hope for a bigger dream, which is Hollywood. Despite being "oriental" girls in a predominantly white entertainment industry, the club enabled them to envision themselves achieving success on the big screen, akin to the iconic Chinese American actress Anna May Wong. By mirroring the glamour of Hollywood and symbolising their pursuit of the American Dream, the club gave them the courage to aspire for more.

Their complex relationship with Hollywood reveals its dual character as a place of opportunity and a reminder of their cultural and racial exclusion. Hollywood, which represented the ultimate destination of their American dream, was largely inaccessible to Asian performers like them. At the brink of her first chance to dance on screen in a Hollywood film, Ruby's identity as Japanese gets finally revealed to the world, and she gets forcefully taken to an internment camp meant for 'enemy aliens.' While Ruby's exclusion temporarily becomes Grace's chance, and she grabs the opportunity to perform on screen in a movie, her success

is only fleeting. She gets no further chances in films and is forced to return to Forbidden City. The nightclub becomes not just a site of dreams but also serves as a place of refuge where Grace returns and reclaims her identity after being shunned in Hollywood. For Ruby also, the nightclub remains instrumental in her release from captivity. Her past life as a top performer at the nightclub prompts Lee Mortimer, a journalist and supporter of the nightclub scene, to secure her release from the Topaz War Relocation Centre, where she had been incarcerated. Later, even when Ruby and Grace could no longer perform at Forbidden City due to various factors, their fame as performers there got them jobs at the '*Chop-Suey* Circuit', in which mainstream nightclubs across the country invited them to perform 'novelty acts'. These performances, while often exotic and stereotypical, provided Grace and Ruby with opportunities for financial independence and fame that extended beyond the Chinese American community.

An epilogue to the novel set in 1988 mentions that the three of them, Helen, Grace, and Ruby, became "big in the Chinese-American community" and that even Ruby had come to be "accepted as being more 'Chinese' than most Chinese" (369). The distinctly transcultural space of the nightclub, the main stage for Ruby's repeated performances of her assumed Chinese ethnicity, finally helps her to get accepted as honorary Chinese despite her original Japanese ethnicity. The liminal, transcultural nature of the Chinese American nightclub thus even enables the centuries-old hostilities between Chinese and Japanese cultures to fade away in this context. This performance space thus comes to represent for Grace, Helen, and Ruby a place of refuge, to where they returned when their lives suffered from

crises. It encapsulates their hopes, dreams, and struggles. It is also where they learn to navigate the intersections of race, gender, and performance, reconciling their individual and collective selves, their multiple identities and subjectivities as Chinese, Japanese, and American, as women, and as performers. It is where they first assert their own individuality while simultaneously learning to form deeper bonds with people and understand the perks and perils of sisterhood. For Grace, Helen, and Ruby, the nightclub is not just a space that represents a career milestone but also a complex site of survival, resilience, and reinvention of their identities in a world that offers them little ways to succeed.

The novels *Shanghai Girls* and *China Dolls* highlight the way in which spaces influence and inform the intersection of aspects such as cultural identity, gender, familial dynamics, and immigrant survival in the difficult decades of the 1930s and 1940s, marked by the Second World War. Set in an important historical period, these works focus on cities like Shanghai, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, and spaces like Chinatown, China City, Angel Island Immigration Centre and the Chinese American nightclub Forbidden City, revealing how these spaces act as complex environments that simultaneously exploit and liberate the female protagonists as they shape their identities. On the other hand, Jean Kwok's novels *Girl in Translation* (2010) and *Mambo in Chinatown* (2014) are set in New York in more recent periods and therefore explore more contemporary immigrant experiences. Ethnic enclaves, exploitative workplaces, academic spaces, and performance spaces are explored as transformational places that shape the

transcultural identities and subjectivities of the protagonists as they manoeuvre through the complexities of familial duty, tradition, and ambition.

In her debut novel, *Girl in Translation,* Kwok's narration of young Kimberly's challenges of cultural adaptation and identity formation progresses through the three major spaces that she inhabits, namely, her initial apartment in Brooklyn, the clothing factory, and school. These spatial configurations are at the heart of Kimberly's journey, as they act as critical sites where cultural negotiations and identity formation take place in her formative years. These spaces form crucial zones that encompass the negotiations of her dual identities and her progress towards self-actualisation. Soon after they arrive in New York, Kimberly and Ma live at the Staten Island apartment of her Aunt Paula for a short while. While the stay is short, the space represents feelings of false hope, insecurity, and disillusionment for the mother and daughter. Even though Aunt Paula is Ma's own sister, Kimberly quickly learns that they are not truly welcome at her house. Despite providing them with temporary shelter, Aunt Paula's treatment of them clearly indicates that she does not view them as family. For instance, Aunt Paula shows off her fancy tea and cookware but does not let Kimberly or Ma use them. Aunt Paula's house thus symbolises the cultural and class differences, as well as the precarity of the conditions they face as new immigrants. While the initial agreement between Ma and her sister was that they would live together, Aunt Paula repudiates her words and moves them to an old apartment in Brooklyn. This dilapidated old apartment symbolises the realities and struggles of immigrant life while also emerging as a space of resilience as well as cultural continuity. Kwok's

stark description of the apartment reveals the decrepit environment that Kimberly and Ma find themselves in:

> My pulse pounded in my throat as I watched her climb the wooden stairs. They had been worn by years of use and each step warped, slanting sharply downward to the banister. I worried that a step would give way and Ma would fall through…most of the windowpanes were missing or cracked, with filthy shards of glass protruding fromthe wooden frame. A thick layer of dust covered the small kitchen table and wide sink, which was white and pitted. As I walked, I tried to avoid the brittle bodies of the dead roaches scattered here and there. (*Girl in Translation* 7–8)

This description highlights not just the neglected nature of Kimberly and her mother's living spaces but also their marginalised social status in America as impoverished immigrants. Kimberly's unfavourable first impressions of her living quarters reflect her feelings of displacement and the dissonance between their expectations about life in America and the realities they currently face. The apartment physically manifests its role as a space of struggle with its freezing temperatures in the winter. Ma and Kimberly must keep "the oven on day and night" and perform all their chores near it in the absence of a heating system. The oven is an ineffective heating system as its heat "never reached the walls, the floor or the furniture" (*Girl in Translation* 52–53). The cold permeates every aspect of their lives, and with their inadequate winter wear, they have to wear many layers of clothing even indoors. For Kimberly, even many years after leaving the apartment, her "predominant memory" about life in that memory is the cold "that crept down

your throat, under your toes and between your fingers, wrapped itself around your lungs and your heart" (44). Further, the apartment's lack of *feng shui*, which carries significant cultural meanings for its Chinese inhabitants, further alienates them from their place of residence. It has its bathroom "in the kitchen and its door directly fac[ing] the stove, which any child knows is terrible *feng shui"* (8). Feng shui, an ancient Chinese traditional architectural system of structural or spatial arrangements, represents harmony and the balanced flow of energy within a space. Its absence symbolises the disorder and misfortune of their living conditions as well as reflects the emotional and cultural disconnect that they face at their new location.

Interpreting the apartment in terms of Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad referred to earlier in this chapter, it can be seen as a contested and multi-dimensional site of both oppression and agency. The physical conditions of the house, with its physically degraded, unheated, and pest-infested interiors, correspond to Lefebvre's "perceived space," materially reflecting their socioeconomic marginalisation as recent immigrants. The perceived space also demonstrates how spatial arrangements are shaped by systemic inequalities rather than existing as neutral entities. The apartment is not merely a residential building, but also functions as a physical and symbolic manifestation of their precarious social position within larger structures of dispossession.

However, despite its inhospitable nature, Kimberly and her mother attempt their best to transform the apartment into a space of adaptation and resistance. This again corresponds to Lefebvre's concept of "lived space," as they attempt to imbibe and navigate the new environment in personal and emotional terms. Despite the

hostility of the perceived space, they inhabit it with resilience. They try to make it liveable by cleaning and adapting with whatever resources are available. They try to maintain their cultural traditions even in this space and foster a sense of continuity and stability even amidst the chaotic new life. They put up the "*Tong Sing,* the Chinese Almanac," believed to contain "many *phu"* or "words of power" at the head of their mattress and also set up altars for "the earth god, the ancestors, the heavens, the kitchen god and Kuan Yin" in the kitchen and pray to these gods to keep away troubles and help make their lives easier (20-21). These artefacts highlight how much immigrants, like Kimberly and her mother, value the continuation of their cultural heritage even in an alien land. Even an old apartment can metamorphose into a space that fosters traditional Chinese culture, despite the harsh realities of immigrant life. Kimberly and Ma find comfort in the performances of their traditional rituals, drawing strength from the cultural identification that they derive from them. These everyday spatial practices and rituals show how the apartment, despite its condition, becomes a part of their daily routine and emotional life. The apartment thus emerges simultaneously as a site of hardship and a place where their emotional bond as mother and daughter is strengthened.

Another space that Kimberly and *Ma* spent much of their time together at is the clothing factory where they work. The factory, also termed a sweatshop, indicating the poor labour conditions and harsh work environment, is a space of both exploitation and connection. It represents a place where the tough realities of immigrant life are exposed and experienced. Jane E. Rose comments that Jean Kwok, in her semi-autobiographical novel *Girl in Translation,* reinforces the

severity of the harsh labour conditions and illegal child labour that many Chinese immigrant women and children had to undergo at the hands of exploitative employers (402). Marked by physical hardship and dehumanising conditions, the factory demonstrates the economic exploitation faced by immigrant labourers, like Kimberly's mother:

> It was a cavernous hall bulging with exposed beams and rusting bolts covered in ever-thickening layers of filth. There were mountains of fabric on the floor next to the workers, enormous carts piled high with half-finished pieces, long metal racks hung with the pressed and finished clothes. Ten-year-old boys rushed across the floor dragging carts and racks from section to section. The fluorescent light swirled down to us through the clouds of fabric dust, bathing the tops of the women's heads in a halo of white light. (Kwok *Girl in Translation* 29-30)

The above description clearly sets a tone of decay and unhealthiness, betraying a sense of overcrowding and chaos, highlighting the never-ending volume of work that the labourers are expected to finish. The description also clearly indicates child labour, which, although illegal, is part of the reality lived by immigrants. The workers are dehumanised into anonymous labourers, part of an oppressive environment devoid of any individuality. In Foucault's terms, the sweatshop, with its confined and exploitative nature and operating outside of the mainstream American legal structure, is a form of heterotopia. This sets it apart from the idealised notions of the American Dream and exposes the deeply imbalanced power structures at play. Within this heterotopic space, the immigrant labourers' bodies become sites of

resilience and endurance, continually negotiating the physical toils of labour with the emotional strain of their circumstances. Unlike the other workspaces analysed earlier in this chapter, the sweatshop is not a place of opportunity but a space of exploitation that suppresses Kimberly, taking up a large chunk of her time and effort, thereby affecting her performance at school. Her physical exhaustion upon juggling school and factory work reflects the immigrant body's burden as it struggles to balance economic survival and aspirations of upward social mobility. The factory becomes a trap for Chinese immigrant children like Kimberly, creating a vicious cycle of lifelong exploitation. As Aunt Paula remarks, they "enter at this table as children, and leave from it as grandmas" (31). This statement evinces that once an immigrant starts working at the sweatshop, it becomes difficult to escape the cycle of poverty and harsh labour, as the place reduces them to mere cogs in a machine, providing them with little opportunity to succeed in life. For Kimberly, the factory thus becomes another space to escape, just like the dilapidated apartment and neglected neighbourhood that she resides in.

The factory, while primarily a space of exploitation and physical hardship, also doubles as a space of community for Kimberly and *Ma* in some ways. It is where they meet and spend time with other Chinese American people, bonding and making acquaintances with them. Particularly for Kimberly, the time spent at the factory is the only opportunity to meet other Chinese children of her age and bond with them. For instance, she meets with Matt, who also works at the factory. Matt saves Kimberly from the bullying from other children and also helps her navigate the harsh and unfamiliar surroundings of the factory. Owing to his familiarity with

factory life, he understands Kimberly's struggles as a new immigrant suddenly thrust into child labour, recognises her intelligence and talents, and empathetically validates her experiences. Matt's companionship offers Kimberly a sense of comfort as she adjusts to her life in America. Thus, while the factory is predominantly an exploitative and unforgiving place for Kimberly, the support and companionship she receives from friends like Matt and his brother make the place a little more bearable for her. The factory thus offers a complex and multidimensional space that shapes Kimberly's initial experiences after immigration and her adaptation to life in America. Her harsh experiences at both the apartment and the factory strengthen her resolve for social mobility and drive her to work hard for academic success, which Kimberly sees as the only way to improve the lives of herself and her mother.

With her immense passion for academic success, the spaces of the two American schools where she studies become the most pivotal of all spaces that Kimberly occupies in the novel. The schools serve as significant transcultural contact zones that enable Kimberly to mingle with children belonging to mainstream American society beyond the Chinatown residents and factory workers. The opening lines of the novel, where Kimberly says that she "was born with a talent…a knack for school," show the importance that school as an institution held for her. It is the only space Kimberly feels that she was "formed to fit in" (1). However, as a new immigrant, her initial experiences with public school in New York are of cultural dissonance and alienation. Entering the American schooling space for the first time, Kimberly is confronted with the challenging realities of the systemic inequalities that immigrant students face. With limited English proficiency and unfamiliarity

with American social norms, Kimberly becomes an outsider in her class. Mr. Bogart, her teacher, comes across as unsympathetic to her challenges with communication and adaptation to the new cultural norms, which makes Kimberly's adjustment to the new school even more difficult. Her "English mistakes clearly annoyed" Mr. Bogart and he "seemed to dislike" her for no apparent reason (27, 59). Her teacher misinterpreted Kimberly's struggles with understanding his accent as her deliberate disrespect. Mr. Bogart's lack of understanding of his students' struggles highlights the lack of cultural sensitivity and support for immigrant students within the American school system.

Coming from a completely different cultural background, Kimberly's initial dissonance with the behavioural norms in the American educational space further alienates her. Another reason for her marked exclusion from the school environment stems from the unequal socioeconomic position of immigrant children like Kimberly. Her apparently Chinese face and her "homemade, ill-fitting clothes and boyish hair" distinguished her from her classmates, and her limited English often made her the centre of attention in her class (62). These harsh experiences faced at school expose the subtle ways in which systemic inequalities, caused by intersecting factors such as race, ethnicity, language, and class, manifest in the educational space and create additional obstacles for immigrant students to overcome. Kimberly initially struggles to balance the dual pressures of her American surroundings and Chinese background, even leading her to remain absent from class for days without the knowledge of her mother or teachers. However, she eventually adjusts to the school conditions, thereby demonstrating the resilience of immigrants in negotiating

foreign cultural settings and establishing their own paths to success. She befriends a white girl called Annette, who warmly welcomes her and shows compassion. "*Despite Mr. Bogart,* [Kimberly] looked forward to school: for the joy of seeing Annette, and for the heat" (53). Kimberly acknowledges that Annette's friendship "was the best thing" that happened to her in America, as it helps Kimberly to cope with the challenges of assimilation in an otherwise unforgiving academic space (62). This genuine friendship between two young girls, in spite of their diverse ethnic and social backgrounds, shows how individual acts of kindness may help in bypassing systemic hurdles, making the immigrant Kimberly feel less isolated and more confident in her own strengths.

Despite the challenges faced, the American public school offers Kimberly a space for self-assertion and personal growth. Once the initial challenges are overcome, the academic environment of the American schooling system recognises Kimberly's natural brilliance in mathematics and science and presents her with opportunities for advancement. She is provided with a full scholarship to Harrison Prep School, "one of the best college [preparatory] schools in the country" (103). Harrison, an elite private school, represents a microcosm of the affluent American social environment, which is completely in contrast to the chaotic and challenging spaces of home, factory, and public school that Kimberly has inhabited until now. Marked by privilege and discipline, the structured, orderly setting of Harrison is entirely "foreign" to her, but also is a physical representation of the American dream that she aspires for (130). The blatant display of affluence and aesthetic perfection of the spatial locales of Harrison initially intensifies Kimberly's sense of her own

socio-economic backwardness, reinforcing the awareness of her exclusion from this environment. The school, which values individual achievement, competitiveness, and sophistication, acts as a conduit for the dominant American norms and ideologies.

Moving from her impoverished background and traditional Chinese upbringing, Kimberly's time inhabiting this space provides varying moments of cultural dissonance and adaptation. For instance, the gym class at Harrison, where all students change clothes together in the same room, becomes a significant source of cultural dissonance for Kimberly, whose very body is marked by the traditional Chinese cultural emphasis on bodily modesty. This situation forces Kimberly to indulge in a direct bodily negotiation between her Chinese cultural upbringing and the more liberal American customs. Further, it also exposes Kimberly's worn-out underclothes, as well as her inability to afford proper gym attire, which makes her susceptible to ridicule from classmates. Her body itself becomes a marker of her cultural as well as economic disparity from her peer students. The peer pressure to conform to the dominant customs also affects her relationship with her mother, who is hesitant to buy new underclothes due to financial issues, leading to Kimberly's eventual outburst: "I told you, everyone changes together and everyone looks at each other! This isn't China, Ma!" (136). This outburst reveals Kimberly's emotional tension as she straddles the cultural divide and her struggle to come to terms with the dual cultural realities. This is a significant moment in Kimberly's negotiation of a transcultural identity—it both signifies her pressure to conform to the dominant cultural practices and her hesitation to completely let go of her old

cultural values. Kimberly's argument with and final convincing of her mother to buy new clothes signifies her growing agency and individualism as she negotiates cultural identities and attempts to reconcile with the demands of assimilation.

Beyond her academic pursuits, Kimberly's self-Americanisation efforts are also evident in her social and physical interactions. As she becomes more comfortable with her surroundings and the American customs, she also begins to explore the relationship dynamics of her new environment, particularly in her relationships with boys.

> At school during my free periods, I spent a lot of time taking walks hand in hand with boys. We would walk and we would make out. This was exactly what Ma had warned me not to do with boys, which only made it more fun. I was forced to be responsible in so many other ways that I was glad to have the freedom over my own body. (206)

Here, Kimberly's physical experiences and choices reflect her transcultural journey, as the body itself becomes a site of conflict between the traditional Chinese and liberal American values. Having been brought up with strict, conservative Chinese perspectives on bodily autonomy and romantic relationships, Kimberly's experiments in her relationship with boys signify a desire for agency and rebellion in a life where much of what happens feels beyond her control. The act of defiance against her mother's conservative warnings signals Kimberly's growing independence and a desire to negotiate between the Chinese and American cultures on her own terms.

Despite the initial challenges, Harrison also proves to be a relatively more accommodating space for Kimberly in comparison to her previous public school. The new school provides Kimberly with facilities such as a dedicated tutor to help her improve her English skills. She also receives help from the school librarian, Mr. Jamali, who lends her the old books and magazines that were no longer in use at the library. Such institutional support and resources reflect the stature of schools like Harrison Prep as a transformative space of opportunity and potential for immigrant students like Kimberly, who is provided with the tools that help her to bridge her cultural and linguistic gaps. These resources and tools, along with her own natural brilliance and hard work, help Kimberly regain her confidence and do well in studies. At Harrison, therefore, while she suffers from cultural dissonance and alienation initially, her struggles are acknowledged as well as addressed, in contrast with her experience at the public school. This support enables Kimberly to adapt more effectively to the American academic and cultural environments, thereby assisting her transcultural identity formation. With access to the resources, mentorship, and academic opportunities at Harrison, Kimberly ultimately becomes successful in securing admission at Yale University with a scholarship. This upward progression of her educational opportunities highlights the role of Harrison as an important formative space that empowers Kimberly to envision a better future for herself and her mother by transcending her socio-economic limitations.

While *Girl in Translation* follows the protagonist Kimberly's pursuit of social mobility through her navigation of the educational, domestic, and workspaces that also shape her transcultural identity, in *Mambo in Chinatown,* Kwok shifts her

focus onto the cultural negotiations between the contrasting worlds of traditional Chinatown and the flamboyant, Westernised world of ballroom dance. Like the sophisticated academic spaces traversed by Kimberly, the liberating, yet challenging, performance spaces navigated by Charlie Wong in *Mambo in Chinatown* become sites where the tensions between cultural preservation and assimilation are played out. However, while the former novel emphasises academic and intellectual performances as pathways to successful integration into American society, the latter focuses on bodily performance as an avenue for self-actualisation and transcultural negotiation. In this matter, the novel may even be comparable to *China Dolls*. Whereas See's novel delves into the shared experience of cultural commodification and the pursuit of the American dream within the 1930s nightclub spheres, Kwok highlights the individual's mediation between tradition and modernity through dance. *Mambo in Chinatown* is Kwok's second novel, published in 2014, and follows the story of Charlie Wong, a twenty-two-year-old American-born Chinese, "the daughter of a dancer and a noodle-maker" who works "as dishwasher at a restaurant in New York's Chinatown" where her father was the "noodle master" (*Mambo* 1). Set in contemporary times, *Mambo in Chinatown* looks at Charlie's struggles as she discovers her own artistic self even amidst the constraints of her father's traditional Chinese upbringing, ethnocultural barriers, and her own apprehensions. Charlie traverses between the contrasting transcultural realms of Chinatown and the dance studios of Manhattan as she pursues her personal aspirations and independence while balancing familial obligations and cultural expectations. Charlie's movement between these two opposing spaces becomes a metaphor for her straddling of her dual identities—of a dutiful Chinese daughter and

an aspiring ballroom dancer—and showcases the ways in which she negotiates her independent transcultural self while also remaining connected to her roots.

As a first-generation Chinese American who lives in Chinatown with her immigrant father and younger sister, Charlie's life is defined by duty and restriction, governed by her father's adherence to traditional Chinese principles. As the elder daughter and having lost her mother at a young age, Charlie has donned the role of a caretaker for her younger sister and therefore is expected to prioritise familial interests over her own personal aspirations. With her clumsy hands, "tanned" skin, and "homely" looks, as well as her below-average talent for studies, Charlie's opportunities for success in life are limited (4). Her current job as a dishwasher in a restaurant illustrates the constraints of economic mobility available to immigrant families like that of hers in Chinatown. Even her late mother, who "was once a star ballerina at the famed Beijing Dance Academy," had to bury her talent after coming to America, owing to her lack of English speaking and connections in the dance world (1). Although "her life had been swallowed by hard labor," Charlie's mother had trained her in the basics of dance, perhaps hoping that her daughter would one day live up to the dreams she could not fulfil herself (12). However, in the working-class world of Chinatown, where survival takes precedence over self-expression, Charlie's flexibility and strength mean very little, as she has no real opportunity to apply them.

Chinatown here is thus primarily a site of economic struggles and financial precarity, where, despite immense hard work, possibilities of social advancement are almost non-existent. Charlie wishes for a better job, not only for better income but to

change herself from her clumsy, non-confident self to “someone poised, elegant and beautiful” (7). While her father did not forbid Charlie from seeking job opportunities outside, he was perpetually suspicious of anything American or western, which is illustrated in his hesitation to try western medicine to treat Lisa or his refusal to let Charlie wear fashionable dresses and go on dates. As a young woman, her father expects her to remain under his protection until she turns twenty-five, after which she would be expected to “somehow be married” (65). Thus, while Chinatown is a place of cultural continuity and belonging, it also represents for Charlie a space of confinement and self-repression. It is a place where she feels stifled and unseen, not attracting any undue attention.

Kwok depicts Chinatown as an insular, self-contained world where the interactions with outsiders are minimal, ensuring cultural preservation. Having internalised this sense of separation, Charlie lacks the confidence, qualifications, and experience required to navigate the larger American world outside Chinatown. This restricts her from seeking her fortunes elsewhere. It is only with the constant encouragement from her sister Lisa that Charlie applies for a position as a receptionist at the dance studio and ends up getting the job. For Charlie, Chinatown thus symbolises a mental border that contains her, keeping her tethered to self-doubt and duty, making it a boundary that she dares not to cross. Anzaldua writes about the life of a “woman of color,” alienated from and inhabiting “different worlds” in a dominant culture that she “does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self,” preventing her from engaging fully or making “full use of [her] faculties” (43). Only by forcing herself to take a first step outside this mental borderland is Charlie finally

able to break free of her inhibitions and pursue her aspirations. However, due to the conservative nature of her father, Charlie is forced to hide her new job from her father and convince him that her job was at an office related to computers. And eventually, when she gets the chance to actually learn dance at the studio, she takes greater efforts to hide the fact from her father—she leaves home in her usual clothes and changes at the studio into her glamorous dance clothes and vice versa when she returns home.

Her work as a ballroom dancer disrupts the conventional notions of propriety and respectfulness in Chinatown, which makes it necessary for Charlie to keep her dancer identity a secret, particularly from her father. To this end, she adopts the cover of an unremarkable, obedient, dutiful, selfless, and traditional Chinese daughter—an identity that fits better in her father's world. The only place in Chinatown where Charlie feels a part of her own self is her godmother Yuan's Tai Chi class, where she volunteers part-time as an instructor. The Tai Chi class, while completely rooted in traditional Chinese philosophy, helps her find "mental and physical balance" and unify "body and soul." Charlie acknowledges that the tai chi classes made her feel "centered," and "at home" in her body (Kwok *Mambo* 49). Her background in Tai Chi training helps Charlie immensely when she finally begins her dance classes at the studio. Thus, tai chi, even with its deep connections to traditional Chinese wisdom, serves as an unlikely bridge that smoothens Charlie's transition into western ballroom dancing. The Tai Chi class thus becomes a space that enables Charlie to overcome her clumsy self and take control of her body,

emphasising its harmony with the mind. It reflects an intermediary space that helps Charlie negotiate her native traditions with her evolving self.

In contrast to the traditional and constraining environment of Chinatown, Kwok constructs the dance studio "on the Upper East Side, a world away from downtown Chinatown" as a site of liberation and self-discovery (18). For Charlie, it is almost part of a sublime world where she is judged only by her talent and effort and not by her racial background. As a timid outsider who enters the dance studio initially only as a receptionist, Charlie is a clumsy, inexperienced young woman who only wants to be around dancers because it reminds her of her late mother. According to Adrienne, the manager of the studio, Charlie "has no dreams of being discovered" as a dancer, which is why she is hired as a receptionist (24). However, in time, some peculiar situations arise, due to which Charlie is forced to assist with one of the dance classes, making her natural talent obvious, leading Adrienne and Dominic to consider hiring her as a replacement for one of their dancers. Charlie eventually begins to learn ballroom dancing as well as handle some of the beginners' dance classes at the studio, competes and wins a prize in a dance competition, and even finds love in the process. The dance studio thus serves as a space of absolute transformation for Charlie Wong, where she undergoes physical, emotional, and psychological growth through her pursuit of dance. Charlie transforms from an insecure and clumsy girl, burdened by familial obligations and duties, into a self-assured and confident woman. At the outset of the novel, Charlie sees herself as physically and socially awkward, devoid of any attractive qualities, a perception developed partly due to her learning disability as well as many years of working as a

dishwasher at a Chinatown restaurant. For instance, during her receptionist interview, Charlie confesses to Adrienne and Dominic, “I’m the clumsiest person you ever saw. I could never dance” (23). However, once she starts learning the dance movements, Charlie slowly gains control over her body, perhaps aided by the initial training she received from her mother as a child and her background in Tai Chi. She acquires more fluid movements as she trains further and eventually learns to carry herself with elegance, grace, and poise, just “like Ma” (406).

Dancing transforms not only Charlie’s movements but also her appearance. Her choice of clothes changes from shapeless, baggy tops and thick pants to fashionable dresses that “flowed down” her body and low necklines that “defined the line of [her] neck and arms” (113). She also learns how to apply makeup and look beautiful. Charlie’s dance training helps her grow more “aware of [her] entire body” and makes her feel “alive and free,” like she “was discovering [her] true self, that [she] was more than just a dishwasher from Chinatown” (161). She begins to walk “proud, shoulders back and neck stretched out long,” making herself look like she really “belonged” in the dance studio (178). Her confidence and her ability to move assuredly in new spaces significantly improve as a result of this new bodily awareness: “For the first time in my life, I now rode the subway every morning, rocketing north out of Chinatown,” she narrates, “I descended into the station in one world, and I emerged, half an hour later, in an entirely different one” (101). In another instance, Charlie even accompanies her friends Zan and Mo Li into Decadence, “an Asian nightclub on the outskirts of Brooklyn Chinatown,” where she

dances “song after song” and discovers a part of herself she had “never known existed before” (189, 196).

The dance studio also enables Charlie to build social connections outside of her community by introducing her to a diverse set of people who share with her a common interest in dance—including her mentors Adrienne, Dominic, and Julian, her new dancer friend Nina, and her partner Ryan. As she builds these intercultural friendships, her worldview broadens, which further improves her confidence in asserting her place in new environments beyond her ethnic enclave. The merit-based space of the dance studio empowers Charlie to succeed in mastering newer dance movements with persistent effort. She experiments with various kinds of dances, including European and Latin styles, stepping beyond the insulated confines of her native culture and embracing a more hybrid, fluid sense of self. With its bold, expressive, and passionate movements, Latin dance marks a stark contrast with the values of restraint and modesty emphasised in traditional Chinese culture. Mastering these new, hybrid dance forms, helps Charlie to transcend cultural boundaries and indulge in self-expression beyond ethnic divisions. By adapting to different styles, she also develops an evolving selfhood that easily navigates multiple cultural influences.

Charlie’s body, as it moves between Chinatown and the dance studio, becomes a site of transcultural negotiation, reflecting the undercurrents between Chinese cultural expectations of modesty and duty and American ideals of freedom and self-expression. The transformation that Charlie’s body undergoes through dance enables her to reclaim her confidence and agency. She learns to balance the

discipline she acquires from her Chinese life with the self-assertion she acquires from the American dance studio, thereby amalgamating her dual cultural influences rather than rejecting one in favour of the other.

In these two novels, Jean Kwok "offers stories of young women who navigate two worlds," in "a careful dance" trying to keep their Chinese and American realms of life separate (Brettel 27). However disparate as the protagonists try to keep the spaces they inhabit, they inevitably collide, forcing them to redefine their identities as they confront the tensions between the dual aspects of their identities. As Monica Chiu observes in her analysis of *Girl in Translation*, the protagonists' failure to separate their "spheres of influence" makes these novels more complex to interpret than is apparent "Spheres of Influence" 187).

The city of New York becomes a crucial site where the tensions between these separate spheres unfold. In both *Girl in Translation* and *Mambo in Chinatown,* Kwok portrays New York City not as a unified urban space but as a "divided space" that encompasses within itself the dual characters of poverty and affluence, tradition and modernity, oppression and opportunity, parochialism and sophistication (Feng 72–73). These tensions are not abstract; rather, they are experienced through the bodies, mobilities, and emotions of Kwok's protagonists, Kimberly and Charlie, who dwell between Chinatown's insulated cultural environment and the broader American city that exists beyond its borders. Their subjectivities are formed in motion as they traverse and negotiate the physical and cultural boundaries between these spaces. In *Girl in Translation*, Kimberly's

journey around the city is constrained between the spaces of labour and learning, with little opportunity for leisure or freedom. The spatial boundaries within New York reflect and reinforce Kimberly's racial and class identity; she is neither wholly inside nor completely outside the American mainstream. However, despite these constraints, Kimberly develops a sense of agency as she learns to navigate the two worlds, be it the affluent private school or the working-class Chinese environments. These movements also reveal her fluid subjectivity as she learns to interchange cultural codes, navigate boundaries, and endure in a city that simultaneously excludes and shapes her.

Similarly, in her second novel, Kwok makes this spatial dynamic more obvious as Charlie moves between the enclosed environment of Chinatown and the elite and upscale circles of professional ballroom dancing. The spatial divides of New York are stark here too, with Chinatown representing tradition, filial duty, and economic struggles, and the dance studio representing creativity, aspiration, and self-reinvention. As Charlie begins to traverse these two separate spheres, she also begins to carry traces of one world into the other. Her experiences at the dance studio help her unlearn some of the restrictions Chinatown has imposed on her. However, the values of kinship and companionship she carries from Chinatown also help her in building valuable relationships in the posh locales of the dance studio. Thus, Charlie's experiences within these divergent spaces are actually interdependent, and it is this realisation that leads to the formation of a transcultural identity. In this manner, Kwok's representation of New York resists any idealised notions of the city as a simplified melting pot of cultures. Instead, it is revealed as a

fragmented and uneven contact zone, where minority women must constantly adapt, perform, and endure to survive. Their transcultural selves are not predetermined but rather developed through the everyday actions of navigating an urban landscape that remains fundamentally divided.

On examining the four different novels, namely *Shanghai Girls, China Dolls, Girl in Translation,* and *Mambo in Chinatown,* the novels have comprehensively been analysed and evaluated on how identities are negotiated within complex environments of the contact zones, where physical spaces become the sites of embodied experiences. The female protagonists of these novels inhabit and traverse various geographical locales and hybrid spaces but also profoundly influence their evolving identities and selves. These spaces, including their patriarchal homes, hometowns, Angel Island, Chinatowns, factories, schools, and dynamic performance venues like nightclubs or the dance studio, often alternately serve as sites of confinement, liberation, discrimination, and empowerment. The women simultaneously engage with and challenge oppressive cultural expectations and racial discrimination while situating themselves within these liminal spaces. The fluidity of self that they acquire in this process is characteristic of transcultural identity. Often, their bodies themselves emerge as contact zones where cultural expectations are inscribed and contested. While these women perform labour, art, or physical intimacy, they use their bodies as tools to negotiate cultural hybridity and personal autonomy. By celebrating the adaptability and resilience of Chinese American women as they strive to occupy dominant spaces, these narratives provide

a more profound understanding of cultural identity, beyond the binaries of tradition and modernity, East and West, and China and America.

Conclusion

For centuries, the United States of America as a nation has manifestly existed as a beacon of opportunity for immigrant communities from various parts of the globe and has emerged as a fertile ground for the dynamic interplay of diverse cultures. Particularly in the contemporary era, immigration and transnational exchange of people and cultures have become the norm rather than an exception all over the world and more so in America. As such, American literature has also evolved into a heterogeneous mélange of literary traditions, amalgamating diverse writings emerging from immigrants and ethnic minority communities. In this context, the thesis has sought to contribute to the study about the broader field of American literature by focussing its attention specifically on Chinese American women's writing, investigating how the select writers negotiate subjectivities within these environs of cultural contact.

Rather than simply documenting the female experiences of migration and assimilation, emphasis has been placed on understanding how the select women authors actively mediate and express their subjectivities within the dynamic transcultural contact zones of America, where multiple cultural influences intersect and engage with each other. This investigation of Chinese American women's narratives has derived its impetus from the fundamental question of how the writings of ethnic minority writers in the United States negotiate and articulate their multilayered subjectivities within transcultural contexts. Within this rubric, Chinese American women's narratives, with their unique history and convergence of factors,

such as gender, ethnicity, race, and class, offer a particularly potent site for analysis. These narratives do not simply recount lived experiences of cultural transformation but actively engage with and reshape their narrative form and voice to articulate their complex transcultural subjectivities. In these works, factors such as cultural contradictions, pressures of assimilation, race, ethnicity, gender, and class are not just placed in the background but rather function as constitutive elements of self-expression. They make use of fragmented structures, narrative shifts, translingual narrations, and hybridised genres to illustrate their experiences of cultural dissonance and pursuit of belonging. They often engage individual memory with collective histories, domestic idioms of the home with the dominant standardised languages, and inherited cultural expectations of femininity with individual aspirations of self-actualisation. Thereby, these works transcend simplistic assimilationist narration and emphatically present identity as an active process shaped by experience, negotiation, and conflict. These authors do not simply address marginalisation in their works but also structurally and sensitively make the themes of cultural dissonance, gendered experiences, and transcultural belonging legible through their narratives. By thoroughly investigating these narratives, the thesis has not only endeavoured to extend the prevailing understanding of Chinese American literature but also to dispute the traditional notions of passive assimilation in diasporic cultures.

The thesis has also aimed to deepen the knowledge of how Chinese American women's distinctive historical experiences shaped their transcultural subjectivities. With their long and complicated history of migration, exclusion, and

persistent stereotypes, Chinese American women's literature has routinely engaged with the historical experiences of migration and exclusion while also simultaneously addressing the "gendered racialization" they face in mainstream American public spheres as well as the traditional patriarchy they face in their domestic spheres (Parreñas, and Hwang 568). Their portrayal of identities as fluid and continuously evolving disrupts the popular binary assumptions of Chinese and American identities as belonging to opposite ends of the cultural spectrum. In this context, this study has analysed select Chinese American women's narratives using transculturalism, propounded by theorists such as Fernando Ortiz and Wolfgang Welsch, as its core theoretical framework. Transculturalism as a theoretical lens provides an apt mechanism for understanding the individual identity formations portrayed in ethnic minority literatures, which are situated at the intersection of two or more disparate cultures. With their origins in the histories of migration, displacement, and adaptation, multi-ethnic literatures like Asian American writings often challenge conventional Anglo-American narratives and expand the boundaries of American literature beyond its dominant perspectives. It has also provided the researcher with an analytical lens that moves beyond simplistic assumptions and notions of assimilation. This core framework has enabled the examination of complex identity formations of minority ethnic subjects in multicultural societies such as that of the United States. It also recognises the dynamic exchange of cultural elements as well as the power relationships that shape these interactions.

An expansive corpus of Chinese American women's autobiographical and fictional narratives has been identified, and the following seminal as well as

contemporary texts have been selected as the primary sources considering their influence and reception, as well as owing to their engagement with the themes of transcultural identity, gender, ethnicity, memory, language, and space: *Fifth Chinese Daughter* by Jean Kwok, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* by Maxine Hong Kingston, *Where the Past Begins* by Amy Tan, *Dear Friend, From My Life I Write to You in Your Life* and "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers" by Yiyun Li, *Shanghai Girls* and *China Dolls* by Lisa See, and *Girl in Translation* and *Mambo in Chinatown.* These texts, belonging to different times and exploring diverse themes with varying degrees of complexity, offer a comprehensive perspective on Chinese American women's experiences. A comparative review of the primary texts analysed in the core chapters reveals a diachronic evolution of thematic concerns, narrative styles, and transcultural storytelling. The initially analysed personal narrative *Fifth Chinese Daughter* by Wong favoured a straightforward narrative through linear progression of life events, albeit using an unconventional third-person subject position. Wong has approached Chinese American cultural identity by traversing the boundaries between the collectivistic Chinese culture, which emphasises cultural discipline and filial piety, and the individualistic American culture, which foregrounds personal autonomy and individual aspirations. She also aligns with the concerns of feminism by challenging the traditional Chinese preference of sons over daughters. The later personal narratives, including Kingston's *The Woman Warrior,* Tan's *Where the Past Begins,* and Li's *Dear Friend,* have utilised nonlinear and experimental narrative techniques, engaging with transcultural storytelling at the level of the narrative itself. The fragmentations and disruptions of narrative continuity as well as unconventional

blending of genres align with the "transcultural sensibility" that "expresses the confluential nature of cultures," and they :

> . . . promote a new understanding of cultural encounters, revealing the often asymmetrical but always multidirectional flows of cultural circulation that are marked by ruptures, disjunctures, and mutual tensions but also by commonalities and shared ventures, affects, or outlooks. (Dagnino "Global Mobility" 137, 153)

Concerns about cultural identity and belonging, intergenerational dynamics, and linguistic anxieties, as well as the foregrounding of the silenced narratives of women, are the key elements explored in Kingston's *The Woman Warrior.* The foundational thematic concerns established in these seminal narratives are also found to be consistently featured in later autobiographies and fiction. Amy Tan's memoir echoes similar contemplations on memory, language, and herstories, along with a detailed account of the author's creative imagination, which translates the lived experiences of her Chinese foremothers into fictionalised Chinese American narratives. Yiyun Li's memoir and fiction also explore the intersections of memory and language, anxieties about cultural displacement, and creative writing, as well as the complex dynamics of mother-daughter relationships, are observed in Kingston and Tan. However, Li's rare foregrounding of her struggles with mental illness and her road to recovery through her readings of renowned authors from the Western literary tradition offers a fresh intertextual perspective on the theme.

The fictional works by the contemporary authors Lisa See and Jean Kwok venture to explore a multitude of innovative themes. Lisa See's historical fiction

narratives present dramatic representations of an influential period characterised by the Japanese invasion of China as well as the Second World War. These novels also touch upon various sensitive themes, such as the disastrous effects of war, sexual assault, the commodification and stereotyping of Chinese American women's bodies, Chinese exclusion, and citizenship concerns. Apart from linguistic and spatial concerns that have already been discussed, Jean Kwok's novels also offer glimpses into concerns such as exploitative working conditions, child labour, economic hardship, and the pursuit of social advancement. These authors illuminate historical and contemporary experiences of marginalisation and inequalities that Chinese American women continue to face across various historical and social contexts. Such an expansion of their thematic scope reveals how Chinese American women's writing continuously evolves to include multiple perspectives and heterogeneous subjectivities. By incorporating these varied perspectives and experiences, these Chinese American women's narratives contribute to a collective herstory that subverts monolithic perceptions about ethnic women's experiences.

The selection of such a diverse range of texts for analysis in the present thesis has ensured that the validity of individual narratives is upheld without the overt pressure of representation. They also vouch for the multiplicity and heterogeneity of Chinese American women's experiences, in keeping with the theoretical tenets of Asian American feminism, which argues for the inclusion of multiple perspectives and voices. The diverse experiences of Chinese American women portrayed in these texts have also provided a multifaceted outlook on the 'herstory' of the Chinese American community, offering glimpses into the

experiences of women from different generations and with varied migration trajectories. By analysing these personal and fictional narratives of Chinese American women writers, this thesis has argued that these works actively engage with the transcultural subjectivities of their narrators and protagonists through the contact zones of memory, language, and space, thereby also constructing multidimensional herstories of their migration, adaptation, and integration into American sociocultural spheres.

The concept of 'herstories,' as utilised in the study, is a term formerly popularised by feminist scholars to counter traditional male-centric historical narratives by foregrounding women's lived experiences and stories. In the context of the current research, the process of 'herstorying' goes beyond simply documenting the past from a woman-centric perspective. It is considered an active transcultural process by which these Chinese American women writers continuously reshape and redefine identities by navigating the contact zones of memory, language, and space and employing narrative techniques like genre-blending, mnemonic recollections, archival storytelling, linguistic negotiations, and spatial navigation. To contextualise this research further, the thesis has also traced a brief history of Chinese American migration with a special focus on women's experiences, touching upon the cultural, social, and legislative impediments faced by Chinese women in initially immigrating to the United States. These obstacles reflect not just the patriarchal social setup of their native land of China but also expose the discriminatory and exclusionary practices of the American state and the stereotyping gaze of the dominant American public. Using anecdotes and a review of select historiographic texts, the study has

foregrounded the historical erasure of Chinese American women's voices, further validating the necessity of exploring their herstories.

The survey of available literature has revealed that the studies on Chinese American women's writings have been largely concentrated on the popular works by foundational authors like Jade Snow Wong and Maxine Hong Kingston, with the studies on bestselling author Amy Tan's work largely concentrating on her earlier fiction. Very few scholarly studies have been conducted on the works of contemporary Chinese American authors like Lisa See, Jean Kwok, and Yiyun Li. Further, the review has also identified a dearth of studies that comprehensively examine a diverse range of Chinese American women's writings, particularly within the framework of transculturalism, which emphasises cultural "fusions" and flexible subjectivities rather than cultural conflicts and assimilation frameworks (Cheng 251). The present study has been undertaken to address this gap by analysing a diverse body of Chinese American women's texts using a transcultural lens and looking at how the intersectional concerns of gender, ethnicity, race, and class are negotiated within the contact zones of memory, language, and space.

The core theoretical framework of this study has been based on the concepts of transculturation, contact zones, intersectionality, and Asian American feminism. Transculturation, developed by Fernando Ortiz in the context of Cuban societies, explains the formation of new cultural phenomena by the blending of two distinct cultures, typically in a situation of imbalanced power dynamics. Transculturality, developed by Welsch, is more about the plurality of self in a globalised world, where power dynamics may not be as apparent as in a colonial situation. With its centrality

to transcultural theory, the concept of contact zones, developed by Mary Louise Pratt, which refers to the particular sites where transcultural interactions take place, is employed as a crucial element in the analysis. Kimberly Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, as well as Asian American feminism with its focus on multiplicity and heterogeneity, also informed the analyses in this study. Some basic theoretical concepts regarding memory, language, and space also have aided in the analyses in each core chapter. The rationale for selecting these three elements as the contact zones has emerged organically from the recurring thematic preoccupations within the primary texts themselves.

The personal narratives by Wong, Kingston, and Tan have been demonstrated as transcending their merely autobiographical function by serving as cultural documents that raise challenging questions regarding identity, belonging, and self-representation in diasporic and transcultural contexts. These narratives are influenced not only by the necessity to remember but also by the demands of speaking in languages that have not always been their own. Finding a voice within the Western autobiographical tradition that has conventionally privileged white male narrative voices and standardised English, these Chinese American women writers have been obligated to negotiate multiple centres of exclusion and erasure. The tenets of Western feminist scholars including Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Monique Wittig, as well as the discussions of Asian American feminist scholar Trinh T. Minh-ha, validate these concerns regarding their narrative voice. In addition, their position at the intersection of the two distinct conventions of Western and Chinese literary traditions necessitates the

mediation of cultural nuances, memories, and experiences in a way that reflects their hybrid, transcultural identity. Therefore, their writings carry within themselves the weight of historical exclusions and silences, cultural translation, as well as an articulation of the gendered and racial politics that shape their experiences.

Wong's use of the third-person detached perspective instead of the conventional first-person autobiographical subject reveals the negotiation of her Chinese cultural identity with the conventional Western autobiographical tradition of linear progression of life events. Her selective collaboration with and disruption of the dominant mode of conventional Western autobiographical tradition shows her willingness to experiment with transcultural narrative modes. Maxine Hong Kingston's trailblazing fictionalised autobiography *The Woman Warrior* integrates fantasy, Chinese mythology, and history along with personal experiences, family lore, and American realities into a blended narrative telling the herstories of multiple women in her family. The author's persona mingles her narrative voice with those of these women, thereby amplifying their voices and centring their stories, thereby partaking in the construction of herstories. Kingston's inclusion of her mother's talk-stories and multiple subject positions in her personal narrative illustrates the fluid and ever-evolving subjectivity that is characteristic of her complex position as a transcultural ethnic minority woman in America. Amy Tan uses archival storytelling as a mode of narrative and uncovers objects like family memorabilia, including photographs, official documents, letters, and fragments of her own previous unpublished writings, to reconstruct her past and her memories about her family, especially her mother and her maternal grandmother. Tan's exploration of the

memories that connect her Chinese ancestral history with her American upbringing enables her to locate her own subject position within this transcultural space.

Within these personal narratives, memory has been presented as a deeply contested sphere rather than a linear unfolding of their past lives. Through their acts of remembering and their articulation, these writers pose broader questions and concerns of cultural transmission, intergenerational trauma, and narrative inheritance. Their use of varying autobiographical strategies reveals the multiple approaches of reconfiguring individual, familial, and cultural pasts while resisting the subduing tendencies of both Chinese and American patriarchal and racialising histories. For these authors, memory is thus reframed as both an epistemological and affective process, emerging simultaneously as personal and political, fragmented, and reconstructive of subjectivities.

Along with memory, language is also recognised as a potent site of personal and cultural meanings, particularly in the personal and fictional writings of Kingston, Tan, Li, and Kwok. These Chinese American women writers employ linguistic hybridity, genre-blending, and metalinguistic ruminations to reflect the ambivalences and concerns of bilingual and bicultural life. These works are produced within a sociolinguistic space that overtly favours standardised English, often undermining immigrant modes of expression and mother tongues. Seminal authors like Kingston and Tan challenge these hierarchies by reclaiming nonstandard forms of English, thereby validating their bilingual personhood. Kingston's unique diction in *The Woman Warrior* is marked by a vibrant mix of English and Chinese-influenced phrases, aptly termed by Evelyn Chi'en as "Chinglish." In doing so,

Kingston subverts the authority of standard English, and brings to life the narrative rhythms of her mother's talk-stories. In a similar vein, Amy Tan profoundly explores the emotional and cultural value of her mother's "broken English" in "Mother Tongue" and *Where the Past Begins.* Rather than being inadequate, this personal style of language functions as an archive of intimacy, memory, and care for Tan. She foregrounds the affective quality of language against its grammatical perfection, emphasising how it allows subdued voices like that of her mother's to be recovered by conveying emotions and cultural knowledge. Amy Tan's poignant resonance with her mother's "broken English" reflects a central concern of diasporic experience by considering this linguistic difference not as a deficiency but as a legitimate register of intimacy and resistance to the homogenising influence of standard English.

However, Kingston and Tan's focus on language multiplicity and hybridity has been complicated by the analysis of Yiyun Li's works. Li's deliberate self-alienation from her mother tongue, Mandarin, results from her projection of childhood traumas and her complicated relationship with her mother onto her mother tongue. Further, Mandarin, being the official language of her native China, causes reservations in her due to its status as a tool of propaganda, state control, and conformity expected of its citizens. Caught between two linguistic worlds, Li's deliberate choice of preferring the adopted language of English over her mother tongue binds her in a state of ceaseless self-translation, which becomes the central aspect of her negotiations of a transcultural identity. Meanwhile, Jean Kwok's novel *Girl in Translation* focuses on the pragmatic and embodied aspects of language as it operates in the life of a working-class immigrant protagonist. Kwok refrains from

romanticising bilingualism but rather situates it within the daily struggles of cultural translation, economic mobility, and social exclusion.

Being an inherently spatial activity, migration always involves the practice of spatial mobility and displacement. Therefore, space has been identified as an important element of analysis in diaspora and migration narratives. The select Chinese American fictional narratives by Lisa See and Jean Kwok, with their position between two distant lands and their pertinent focus on ethnic enclaves as primary backdrops, have provided suitable conduits for spatial analysis. In the historical narrative *Shanghai Girls*, Lisa See's portrayals of 1930s Shanghai City, Angel Island Immigration Station, Chinatown, and China City reveal how each of these spaces informs and shapes the transcultural subjectivities of the protagonists Pearl and May. Shanghai is described as a city with dual character—one of patriarchal confinement at their traditional Chinese home and a cosmopolitan urban space that offers them opportunities for personal autonomy and financial freedom. Los Angeles Chinatown, on the other hand, acts as a confining space, where Pearl is confronted with traditional gender roles and repressive patriarchal values, in contrast to her independent and vibrant social life in Shanghai. China City, a stereotypical replica of a Chinese town, is a performance space where the protagonists negotiate their transcultural identities in selective collaboration with the dominant American culture. See has taken the theme of performance spaces further in *China Dolls* through the portrayal of Forbidden City, a historical Chinese American nightclub in San Francisco during the 1930s and 1940s. While the nightclub occupies a liminal position with respect to the traditional Chinatown moral codes, this performance

space becomes a conducive environment for the negotiation of the transcultural subjectivities of the protagonists Grace, Helen, and Ruby through their engagement with the American entertainment industry.

Marking a shift from Lisa See's historical fiction, Jean Kwok's novels reflect more contemporary realities and concerns. In *Girl in Translation*, domestic and work spaces serve as the crucial sites where the protagonist's cultural, linguistic, and social identities collide, eventually resulting in the negotiation of a flexible transcultural subjectivity. In the novel *Mambo in Chinatown,* the protagonist, Charlie Wong, navigates between the opposing locales of traditional Chinatown and the upscale, fashionable dance studios of Manhattan, resulting in an evolving transcultural selfhood that negotiates the undercurrents between familial duty and individual aspirations. Charlie's transformation traces an embodied journey from a timid dishwasher at a Chinatown restaurant to a confident ballroom dancer at the Manhattan dance studio, wherein her body itself becomes a tool to negotiate cultural hybridity and achieve personal autonomy.

In these texts, spaces emerge not simply as physical geography but as socially and symbolically significant domains that actively shape the lives of women occupying them. Be it the racialised enclaves of Chinatown, performance spaces of China City, Chinese nightclubs, the sophisticated dance studios of Manhattan, the cramped interiors of urban apartments and sweatshops, or the academic spaces of American schools, these environments are simultaneously characterised by histories of exclusion, patriarchal confinement, orientalist commodification, and racial surveillance. However, authors like See and Kwok have reimagined these spaces as

sites of tactical resistance, affective belonging, and cultural hybridity. The women in these novels actively negotiate their presence in these spaces through embodied acts of mobility and performance rather than passively occupying them. As this thesis has argued, the fictional writings of both See and Kwok emphasise the substantial role of spatial negotiation and embodied performance in the construction of herstories, reflecting the multiple transcultural realities of Chinese American women both in historical and contemporary settings.

The study has also expanded the scope of transcultural literary studies by incorporating, within its framework, the diverse experiences of Chinese American women, thereby integrating intersectional Asian American feminism into its understanding. This research moves beyond the traditional diasporic understandings of migration and assimilation to assert the fluidity and dynamicity of ethnic female identities. The concept of "contact zones," as advanced by Pratt, has been extended to include not just physical but also metaphorical sites of cultural contact and power struggles, namely memory, language, and space. These elements become crucial sites for the construction of herstories as well as the negotiation of transcultural subjectivities in the selected narratives. By highlighting the heterogeneity and multiplicity of Chinese American herstories, the present study has sought to disrupt the assimilationist rhetoric that generally frames ethnic minority narratives. Further, the discussions and findings of this study have implications for various interdisciplinary fields, including Asian American literature and women's writing, as well as memory, sociolinguistics, and spatial literary studies.

The Chinese American women in these transcultural herstories occupy and traverse multiple mnemonic, linguistic, and spatial borderlands. In these often physical and often symbolic borderlands, their native culture and heritage routinely rub shoulders with the dominant American culture, often in conflicting and complex manners. They are also often shaped by the mnemonic legacies of their ancestral land, often experienced firsthand or passed down from one generation to the next. The memories that they carry from the ancestral land often clash and engage with the new experiences and identities formed in the United States, fashioning multifarious subjectivities. These multifarious subjectivities are reflected in the personal narratives of Wong, Kingston, and Tan, both at the levels of form and narrative. They challenge the conventional Western autobiographical forms by experimenting with the autobiographical subject, employing non-linear narrative structures, and blending individual experiences with familial and cultural memories. Memory evolves into a crucial site for negotiation of transcultural subjectivities and mirrors the fluid evolution of identity influenced by both their Chinese ancestry and American experiences. For these diasporic women, memory is constantly shaped and transformed by their spatial and temporal dislocation from the ancestral land and the linguistic and cultural dislocation from the adopted country. In this context, the act of remembering becomes an act of resistance as well as self-making by reclaiming the herstories that have been silenced by the dominant narratives of patriarchy, nationhood, and assimilation.

Linguistically, these women routinely straddle the boundary between their native languages, including Cantonese, Mandarin, Shanghainese, or other Chinese

dialects, and English, which affects the way they communicate as well as how they experience their complex realities. Their position at the borderland between their mother tongue and English causes them to face "language anxiety" in various forms. Their familial, communal, and sociocultural experiences govern the way they make "language choices." These language anxieties and choices also reflect the deeper cultural tensions faced by these women, such as between the desire to maintain intimate ties with one's native language and the pressure of assimilation into the adopted language. Language emerges as a contact zone where cultural hierarchies are acutely made aware through accents, code-switching, "weird English," "Chinglish," or "broken English," marking their voices as 'other' within the standard English-speaking dominant American society. In addition to this, the anxiety pertaining to the loss of fluency in and disconnect from one's mother tongue produces feelings of alienation within one's family or community, as certain memories and experiences may only be accessible to them in their native tongue. These anxieties and choices are also reflected in the way Chinese American women writers negotiate and articulate transcultural subjectivities in their literary works. In the personal as well as fictional writings of Kingston, Amy Tan, Yiyun Li, and Jean Kwok, the complex relationship of language with cultural memory, personal traumas, and individual identities is explored in diverse ways. Kingston and Tan's acceptance and validation of their bilingual selfhood, Li's self-imposed monolingual personhood, and Kwok's depiction of Kimberly Chang's self-translation from Cantonese to English and vice versa, all emerge as potential strategies for the navigation and articulation of their complex Chinese American identities.

Spatially, they traverse the contact zones such as Chinatowns, academic or workspaces, or other cosmopolitan urban spaces in China and America, where they grapple with the quandaries of tradition, modernity, cultural preservation, and assimilation pressures. These are not simply physical locations but racially, culturally, and economically marked spaces that are also constitutive of various affective and symbolic meanings. Be it the deeply stratified urban spaces of Shanghai, the cosmopolitan expanses of Los Angeles, San Francisco, or New York, Angel Island, Chinatowns, academic spaces, factories, apartments, nightclubs, or dance studios, each of these spaces exhibits and enforces different rules of visibility, belonging, and exclusion. In the novels of Lisa See and Jean Kwok considered in the present thesis, private and communal spaces like home and Chinatown are portrayed as sites of gendered constraints and generational conflicts, as well as points of affective memory and cultural preservation. At the same time, while public spaces like schools and workspaces often reinforce marginality through exoticisation, objectification, and propagation of systemic inequalities, they also often materialise as avenues of opportunities for the protagonists to transcend their assumed gender roles and cultural expectations. In these spatial contact zones, these Chinese American women encounter, resist, and reconfigure the intersecting forces of gender, race, and class in their continuous formation of transcultural subjectivities.

As the current study has already discussed, the voices of Chinese American women had long been obscured and marginalised in the American literary landscape. However, over the past few decades, they have gradually emerged from the shadows and expanded their appeal and readership. Besides asserting their place in the canon

of American literature, they have also improved the larger public's understanding of the Chinese American experience by depicting their unique perspectives, concerns, and experiences. At this juncture, this thesis has undertaken a comprehensive analysis of select personal and fictional narratives, namely, Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter,* Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior,* Amy Tan's "Mother Tongue" and *Where the Past Begins*, Yiyun Li's *Dear Friend, From My Life I Write to You in Your Life,* and "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers," Lisa See's *Shanghai Girls* and *China Dolls,* and Jean Kwok's *Girl in Translation* and *Mambo in Chinatown*, to demonstrate the diverse ways in which Chinese American women negotiate their identities within complex mnemonic, linguistic, and spatial contact zones. It has also attempted to illustrate how these narratives produce polyvocal herstories that reflect the transcultural realities of Chinese American women. By foregrounding the suppressed voices of Chinese American women across generations, the current study endeavours to contribute to the discourse of transcultural identity by interpreting it as an ongoing process that not only challenges fixed representations but also legitimises multiple and intersectional forms of belonging within cultural contact zones. The study has further observed how these stories value fragmentation, contradiction, and complexity as the fundamental features of diasporic existence. As their memories, experiences, and linguistic and cultural identities occupy multiple locations, the protagonists' journeys across these hybrid spaces reflect their continuous negotiations of identity and belonging. By these dynamic movements along the contact zones of memory, language, and space, they carve out new transcultural subjectivities that are neither

fully Chinese nor American but fashioned by the convergence, conflict, and cohabitation of both of these cultural influences.

Recommendations

Any research is an ongoing and evolving activity that continually envisions newer paths of inquiry and knowledge-making. While this study has undertaken a comprehensive examination of transcultural subjectivities observed in Chinese American women's writing by selecting a range of texts from different times, it is also essential to address the scope and limitations of the project. As implied from the title and thesis statement, the scope of this research is limited to the explorations of transcultural subjectivities in a curated list of personal and fictional narratives by select Chinese American women writers. A more extensive and comparative perspective may be obtained by bringing into this purview the works of writers of Native American, African American, Indian American, or Hispanic American ethnic origins.

Since Chinese American literature is an ever-expanding field with a plethora of new writers emerging each year, a broader understanding of the topic may be achieved by studying newer and emerging authors, including Celeste Ng, C Pam Zhang, and Weike Wang. Many of these emerging writers experiment with innovative genres and themes, including speculative fiction, environmental fiction, mysteries, thrillers, children's literature, and young adult literature.

While the concern with genre briefly informs the discussion about women's personal narratives in this study, it has not looked in detail into the genre as a separate stream of inquiry. A transcultural analysis of Chinese American literary

genres may entail an investigation into how Chinese literary traditions and genres influence and translate into diasporic American imaginations.

The present study has identified memory, language, and space as the contact zones that facilitate the understanding of transcultural subjectivities in Chinese American narratives. Future researchers may identify additional aspects, such as religion, body, sexuality, food, fashion, and education. They can analyse how contemporary Chinese American narratives shape and reflect subjectivities within these contact zones.

With the rising global perceptions of China as a looming threat to America's economic power and the rise of anti-Asian sentiments, particularly in light of the recent pandemic, it would be fascinating to study how emerging Chinese American authors and filmmakers use their creative expressions as a form of resistance against racism and systemic inequalities. Emerging and interdisciplinary fields of the humanities, such as posthumanism, digital humanities, environmental humanities, and health humanities, can also inform and support the analysis of contemporary Chinese American literature.

The recommendations stated above reveal the thematic richness and diversity of Chinese American literature, which would surely invite greater scholarly attention on these diverse topics of study. The present study hopes to provide an impetus for more nuanced and diverse explorations of identity within the field of Chinese American women's literature.

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