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Slanted Allusions:

Transnational Poetics and Politics of Marilyn Chin and Russell Leong

King-Kok Cheung

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
—Emily Dickinson

Within Asian American literary discourse, the use of Asian material, particularly Chinese folklore or idioms, has been a fraught and controversial topic from the start. Award-winning writers of Chinese descent—notably David Henry Hwang, Ha Jin, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Amy Tan—all have been excoriated for catering to Orientalism or falsifying Chinese subject matter. Critical misgivings about the evocation of the Orient in Chinese American literature are so pervasive that Chinese scholar Zhao Wenzhu urges critics to turn their attention to “works that do not address China or Chinese culture.”¹ By contrast, Frank Chin, one of the most vehement critics of Hwang, Hong Kingston, and Tan, advocates a thorough reclaiming

of an authentic Asian heroic tradition, including such epics as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Journey to the West*, and *Outlaws of the Marsh*. His wholesale endorsement of traditional classics, however, risks reinstalling patriarchal mores and even smacks of patriarchal ancestral worship.²

This critical debate and Asian American literary analysis in general have by and large focused on content, often overlooking the formal techniques of writers who engage in bilingual interplay. The lack of stylistic analysis has led to an eclipse of poetry by prose, a stress on ethnographic rather than literary value, and a foreshortening of the distinctive bicultural or transgressive vision of some authors.³ In this essay, I wish to suggest an analytical strategy that can attend to both aesthetics and politics, promote exchanges and reciprocal critique between Anglophone and Sinophone worlds, and apply to writers from other backgrounds who have dual linguistic expertise and transnational concerns.

Through the poetry of Marilyn Chin and Russell Leong, I demonstrate that it is possible to invoke ethnic heritage without either pandering to the desire for exotica or kowtowing to patriarchal authority. Looking askance at cultural legacies to convey transnational critique is, in fact, one of the distinctive features of Chinese American literature. By analyzing Chin's "Song of the Sad Guitar" and "Get Rid of the X," and Leong's "Bie You Dong Tian: Another World Lies Beyond," I highlight the two writers' coordination of poetics and politics, their transnational perspectives, and their deployment of ethnic signifiers that steer clear of the Scylla of Orientalism and the Charybdis of ancestral worship.⁴

Before discussing the three poems, I would like to use a well-known passage from Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* to illustrate my notion of "slanted allusions": "The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. . . . What we have in common are the words at our backs. The idioms for revenge are 'report a crime.' . . . The reporting is the vengeance—not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words. And I have so many words—'chink' words and 'gook' words too—that they do not fit on my skin."⁵ Hong Kingston's narrator literally "translates" the Chinese term for revenge, *baochou* 报仇, as "report a crime." Most China-born people would not associate this term with a verbal act, any more than native English

speakers seeing the word *breakfast* would think of its etymological origin—breaking a fast.

In the context of *The Woman Warrior*, however, Hong Kingston's intentional parsing of the idiom resonates with the major themes of her memoir. First, it allows the narrator to defy the silence imposed on her, both by a mother who forbids her to tell her aunt's tragic story and by a boss who fires her for speaking out against racism. Secondly, it enables the narrator to tailor the legend of the Chinese "swordswoman"—Hua Mulan—to her own needs. The dorsal inscription Hong Kingston invokes reminds Chinese readers not of the woman warrior in the Chinese "Ballad of Mulan" but of Yue Fei, a general in the Song Dynasty whose mother carved four words on his back. By conflating Mulan and Yue Fei, Hong Kingston claims literary privilege for Chinese women, who traditionally were denied education. This conflation also allows the author, an avowed pacifist, to redefine heroism by shifting the focus from martial prowess to discursive power. Instead of faulting Hong Kingston for "distorting" the idiom *baochou* or the myth of Mulan, we should perhaps credit her for innovative self-refashioning—especially given that she presents the entire Mulan episode as a fantasy, *not* a lesson on Chinese culture.

A slanted allusion in this example may refer either to a novel interpretation of an autochthonous idiom or to a conscious recasting of primary sources. More than merely a nod to Emily Dickinson (see epigraph), my coinage—like the recuperative term *negritude*—carries a subversive edge, since "slant" (as in "slant-eyed") is a racial slur that often has been hurled at "heathen Chinese." I use the term to signal how Asian American writers use literary allusions defiantly. Paying attention to the myriad ways in which Chinese American authors draw from their trans-Pacific roots may open up discursive space for scholars interested in decentering the Western heritage, exploring the distinction between Chinese and Chinese American discourse, or teasing out the connection between art and politics.

Marilyn Chin and Russell Leong, though they belong to a slightly younger generation, share with Hong Kingston a bilingual ability and bicultural sensibility, a Buddhist bent, a predilection for progressive politics informed by the feminist and civil rights movements, and a penchant for polyglot inter-

play that implicates the dominant Chinese and US cultures. Both Chin and Leong invested considerable time in their youth to learning Chinese. Chin got her BA in Chinese from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, in 1977; Leong studied Chinese and comparative literature at National Taiwan University for over a year during 1974–75. Both have acknowledged the impact of their Chinese educations on their writing. Chin exclaims, “How exciting to have this great opportunity to make a ‘political’ statement about my bicultural identity by exacting my ideas with hybridized forms. . . . I often put a drop of yellow blood in conventional form to assert my bicultural identity. . . . To disrupt the canonical order. To piss on that establishment tree.” Leong puts it more mildly: “I probably played around with words and double meaning when I was learning Chinese. It helped me appreciate the sense of pun in Chinese. . . . Studying Chinese helps me to be aware of the resonance of the language, and I will consciously choose names, titles, that I know make sense even in Chinese, such as *Phoenix Eyes*.”⁶ In fact, the phoenix—a bird that traverses both Eastern and Western mythologies—appears in Chin’s *The Phoenix Gone, The Terrace Empty* (1994), as well as in Leong’s *Phoenix Eyes* (2000).

Unlike early Asian American writers intent on “claiming America,” these two authors reclaim both China and the United States—but on their own terms, via rhetorical turns. They tilt their Chinese allusions so that the indigenous expressions acquire another shade of meaning. Chin reformulates lines and images from Tang and Song verse to divulge ethnic and gender difference and launch a feminist declaration of independence. Leong reverses the trajectory of the Chinese proverb “*Bie you dong tian*” (“Another world lies beyond”) to reveal racial and social stratification and remember migrant laborers on both sides of the Pacific. In other words, their cultural references resist—rather than reinforce—patriarchal authority and Orientalism.

Chin is an admirer of Hong Kingston, to whom she has dedicated the following prose poem:

“Song of the Sad Guitar”

In the bitter year of 1988 I was banished to San Diego, California, to become a wife there. It was summer. I was buying groceries under the

Yin and Yang sign of Safeway. In the parking lot, the puppies were howling to a familiar tune on a guitar plucked with the zest and angst of the sixties. I asked the player her name.

She answered:

“Stone Orchid, but if you call me that, I’ll kill you.”

I said:

“Yes, perhaps stone is too harsh for one with a voice so pure.”

She said:

“It’s the ‘orchid’ I detest; it’s prissy, cliché and forever pink.”

From my shopping bag I handed her a Tsing Tao and urged her to play on.

She sang about hitchhiking around the country, moons and lakes, home-word-honking geese, scholars who failed the examination. Men leaving for war; women climbing the watchtower. There were courts, more courts and inner-most courts, and scions who pillaged the country.

Suddenly, I began to feel deeply about my own banishment. The singer I could have been, what the world looked like in spring, that Motown collection I lost. I urged her to play on:

Trickle, trickle, the falling rain.

Ming, ming, a deer lost in the forest

Surru, surru, a secret conversation

Hung, hung, a dog in the yard.

Then, she changed her mood, to a slower lament, trilled a song macabre, about death, about a guitar case that opened like a coffin. Each string vibrant, each note a thought. Tell me, Orchid, where are we going? “The book of changes does not signify change. The laws are immutable. Our fates are sealed.” Said Orchid—the song is a dirge and an awakening.

Two years after our meeting, I became deranged. I couldn’t cook, couldn’t clean. My house turned into a pigsty. My children became delinquents. My husband began a long lusty affair with another woman. The house burned during a feverish *Santa Ana* as I sat in a pink cranny

above the garage singing, “At twenty, I marry you. At thirty, I begin hating everything that you do.”

One day while I was driving down Mulberry Lane, a voice came over the radio. It was Stone Orchid. She said, “This is a song for an old friend of mine. Her name is Mei Ling. She’s a warm and sensitive housewife now living in Hell’s Creek, California. I’ve dedicated this special song for her, “The Song of the Sad Guitar.’”

I am now beginning to understand the song within the song, the weeping within the willow. And you, out there, walking, talking, seemingly alive—may truly be dead and waiting to be summoned by the sound of the sad guitar.

for Maxine Hong Kingston

Chin’s allusions to *The Woman Warrior* in this piece are readily apparent, even without the open dedication at the end. Hong Kingston’s memoir features five kindred and legendary women: a no-name aunt; Mulan the legendary warrior; Brave Orchid, the narrator’s mother; Moon Orchid, Brave Orchid’s sister; and Tsai Yen, a Chinese poet. Chin’s narrator, Mei Ling (Chin’s Chinese name), reminds the reader of Moon Orchid, who likewise becomes deranged after her husband’s love affair; she also takes after T’sai Yen, the poet in exile who creates lyrics to the measures of Barbarian music. Stone Orchid, for her part, is reminiscent both of Mulan, the androgynous warrior, and of Brave Orchid, the champion storyteller. *The Woman Warrior* is merely one of several literary texts embedded in Chin’s poem. “Song of the Sad Guitar” clearly echoes “Pipa xing琵琶行” (“Ode to Pipa,” which also can be translated as “Song of the Sad Pipa”) by Bai Juyi (白居易, 772–846), a narrative poem about the Tang poet’s encounter with a pipa player by the river at the end of a meal. When the poet (the host) yearns for music to accompany his parting drink with his guests, the company suddenly hears pipa music afloat. The pipa player later recounts her sad life story: she had been a popular musician courted by many a youth, but when her beauty faded, she married a merchant from another town who often leaves her by herself:

去来江口守空船，绕船月明江水寒。

“In his absence I tend an empty boat surrounded by a chilly moonlit lake.

夜深忽梦少年事，梦啼妆泪红阑干。

Last night I dreamed of my lost youth and tears stained my rouged cheeks.”⁷

Bai Juyi, himself banished to a distant land, empathizes with the musician and asks her to play another song; in exchange, he offers to dedicate an ode to her:

我闻琵琶已叹息，又闻此语重唧唧。

I sighed while listening to her pipa; hearing her story I broke into sobs.

同是天涯沦落人，相逢何必曾相识。

“As fellow wayfarers on earth we need not have met to cherish this encounter.

我从去年辞帝京，谪居卧病浔阳城。

Dismissed from the capital last year, I was bedridden at Xunyang.

浔阳地僻无音乐，终岁不闻丝竹声。

Deprived of music in this hinterland, I heard no lutes or flutes all year long.

.....

今夜闻君琵琶语，如听仙乐耳暂明。

Your exquisite pipa tonight is like celestial music to my ears.

莫辞更坐弹一曲，为君翻作琵琶行。

Do not begrudge me another song; I'll render an ode for your pipa.”

感我此言良久立，却坐促弦弦转急。

Touched by my words, she stands transfixed, then sits down and strums fervently.

凄凄不似向前声，满座重闻皆掩泣。

The plaintive tune diverges from preceding strains, making everyone weep.

座中泣下谁最多？江州司马青衫湿。

Who among us weeps the most? The host's black robe is drenched.

Bai Juyi, the pipa player, and Mei Ling are all displaced artists. But while the Tang poet never asks the pipa player her name, Chin devotes a dialogue to the guitarist's first name. This naming may be considered an indirect tribute to *The Woman Warrior*. Given the common Chinese character *lan* 兰 (orchid), which appears in both Moon Orchid's and Brave Orchid's names, Hong Kingston implies that a symbolic sisterhood exists between them and Mulan. To this trio Chin has added "Stone Orchid." In bestowing an allusive name on her guitarist so she would not remain nameless like the musician in "Ode to Pipa" or the no-name aunt in *The Woman Warrior*, Chin implicitly claims lineage to a Chinese American feminist heritage.

Yet, Stone Orchid abhors her floral name because it is "prissy, cliché, and forever pink." Presumably, she does not wish to follow the beaten track of a delicate Oriental maiden. (Perhaps that's also why Chin braces the flower with "Stone.") As if responding to her maverick disposition, Mei Ling offers her a Tsing Tao beer. Whereas only the male host and his guests in "Ode to Pipa" indulge in wine, Chin gives her female musician the freedom to relish alcoholic beverages—which purportedly inspired many a Tang and Song verse ("Drinking Alone under the Moon" by Li Bai [李白, 701–762] is a notable example that I will discuss later at some length). Furthermore, unlike the pipa player marooned in an "empty boat," the guitarist "sang about hitchhiking around the country." Chin thus slants her references to "Ode to Pipa" by giving her female musician a name and the traditionally masculine rights to imbibe alcohol and travel.

Chin also inverts the meaning of the lines in Ezra Pound's "The River-Merchant's Wife," an English rendition of Li Bai's "Chang Gan Xing 长干行": "At fourteen I married My Lord you . . . / At fifteen . . . I desired my dust to be mingled with yours . . . forever and forever. / Why should I climb the lookout? / At sixteen you departed. . . . The leaves fall early this autumn. . . . / They hurt me. I grow older." Li Bai's poem and Pound's rendition monitor the deepening of connubial felicity into eternal love, followed by separation and solitary waiting; Mei Ling sings of matrimonial disenchantment: "At twenty, I marry you. At thirty, I begin hating everything that you do."⁸

In addition to signifying on Bai Juyi and Li Bai, Chin also alludes to Li Qingzhao (李清照, 1084–ca. 1151), a famous female poet of the Song Dynasty. Just as Bai Juyi commiserates with the pipa player as a fellow exile,

Mei Ling feels “deeply about [her] own banishment” upon hearing the guitarist’s lyrics: “There were courts, more courts and inner-most courts.” The line echoes the refrain that opens “An Immortal by the Lake” (临江仙) by Li Qingzhao who, in turn, borrows the line from Ouyang Xiu (欧阳修, 1007–1072): “庭院深深深几许”—literally, “how deep is the deep court(yard) that deepens into another.”

Li Qingzhao is known especially for her lyrics about the sorrowful isolation caused by widowhood, as in these lines from “An Immortal by the Lake”:

庭院深深深几许，云窗雾阁常扃

How deep is the court that deepens into another, casements shrouded in
mist

.....

如今老去无成，谁怜憔悴更凋零，

Aging I live in vain; who would pity a withered petal adrift?

试灯无意思，踏雪没心情。

I find no pleasure in lighting a new lantern; I am heartsick treading the
snow.

The refrain about the deep courtyard calls forth the architecture peculiar to some old Chinese mansions, which had a section consisting of a courtyard and a residential unit leading to another courtyard and residence. But the word *court* in Chin’s poem holds two meanings—referring at once to the imperial court and to the extension of a Chinese compound, where the innermost court is often designated as the women’s quarters. This hints at a connection between ousted court functionaries and sequestered women, since “scholars who failed the examination” and officials (such Bai Juyi and Li Bai) who fell out of favor with the ruling power were barred from the royal court and forced to lead a secluded life. Such an existence, Chin seems to suggest, is no less lonesome than life in an innermost domestic “court” inhabited by royal concubines, forsaken wives, and forlorn widows. The word thus aligns the narrator of “Ode to Pipa,” an official banished from the

imperial court, with Moon Orchid, a jilted wife who locks herself in a dark room; the speaker in “An Immortal by the Lake,” a widow who pines away in the innermost court; and Mei Ling, a woman “banished to San Diego . . . to become a wife” who, two years later, “sat in a pink cranny above the garage singing” a heartbreak song.

Like the various pockets of confinement mentioned in these texts, Chin’s “pink cranny” similarly takes on a double meaning. It recalls the “lookout,” the “empty boat,” the “inner-most court,” and perhaps also the “attic” in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and the “cage” in Maya Angelou’s “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings”—all places associated with female incarceration. But “pink cranny” also may be construed as a womb—or, more figuratively, as a Woolfian “room of one’s own” that incubates ideas. Instead of wallowing in loneliness and regret about “the singer I could have been,” bereft women, Chin hints, can transform captivity into creativity, parlay cages into songs.

Bai Juyi’s musician, Li Bai’s river merchant’s wife, Li Qingzhao’s widow, Hong Kingston’s Moon Orchid, and Chin’s Mei Ling share desolation (and loss of beauty or sanity) on account of a husband’s absence or desertion. By alluding to all these women in her poem, Chin uses Mei Ling’s plight to insinuate that the havoc wrought by spousal abandonment is timeless: “The book of changes does not signify change. . . . Our fates are sealed.” But her simultaneous reincarnation of Mulan, Brave Orchid, and T’sai Yen—and, indeed, of Hong Kingston, whose house burned down in 1991—in Stone Orchid and Mei Ling transforms “Song of the Sad Guitar” from a dirge bemoaning the loss of one’s prime into a call for feminist awakening, urging women who lead lives of quiet desperation—“you, out there”—to rise from their living death and emulate the brazen guitarist who goes against the cliché of the lovelorn lady whose *raison d’être* depends on a husband. By having Stone Orchid, whose ability to create lyrics does not rest on masculine sustenance, dedicate a song to Mei Ling, Chin also broaches the possibility of female bonding and mutual support, of women succoring each other.

This prose poem’s richness emanates from dense layers of allusions, and these are structural, as well as incidental. Just as there is a “song within the song” in the guitarist’s performance, a Chinese-box structure scaffolds Chin’s intertextual composition: Bai Juyi’s dedication to the pipa player within Stone

Orchid's dedication to Mei Ling within Chin's dedication to Hong Kingston; Li Bai's merchant wife's letter within Ezra Pound's merchant wife's letter within Bai Juyi's merchant wife's song within Mei Ling's song; Li Bai's “望夫台 (descry husband tower)” within Pound's “lookout” within the guitarist's “watchtower” within Mei Ling's “pink cranny”; Ouyang Xiu's line within Li Qingzhao's line within Stone Orchid's lyric; the pipa player's song and T'sai Yen's song within the song of the sad guitar; and Mulan's “Orchid” within Hong Kingston's “Orchid” within Chin's “Orchid.”

The allusions to “Ode to Pipa,” “The River-Merchant Wife,” and “An Immortal by the Lake” are, however, askew. Chin harkens back to these Chinese verses not just to lament the lot of abandoned wives but also to inspire women to pull themselves together through their own creativity and mutual sustenance. Bai Juyi's pipa player, Li Bai's river-merchant's wife, and Li Qingzhao's widow bemoan their bleak seclusion and yet are resigned to their lot; Chin's guitarist, by contrast, is a feisty singer who rouses dejected wives from their doleur, who reaches out to Mei Ling with her song and solicitude.

Like “Song of a Sad Guitar,” the following poem by Chin (about a speaker in San Diego who also finds herself unhappily wed) plays on the Yin and Yang dyad:

“Get Rid of the X”

My shadow followed me to San Diego
 silently she never complained.
 No green card, no identity pass,
 she is wedded to my fate.

The Moon is drunk and anorectic,
 constantly reeling, changing weight.
 My shadow dances grotesquely
 resentful she can't leave me.

The moon mourns his unwritten novels,
 cries naked into the trees and fades.
 Tomorrow, he'll return to beat me
 blue—again, again and again.

Goodbye Moon, goodbye Shadow.
 my husband, my lover, I'm late.
 The sun will plunge through the window.
 I must make my leap of faith.

“Get Rid of the X” parodies a famous poem by Li Bai, known honorifi-
 cally in China as “Poet Immortal” (诗仙):

月下独酌 “Drinking Alone under the Moon”	
花间一壶酒	独酌无相亲
A jug of wine amid flowers	Alone, I drink without companions.
举杯邀明月	对影成三人
I lift my goblet to toast Bright	Along with Shadow we make three.
Moon;	
月既不解饮	影徒随我身
But Moon knows not how to	Shadow dogs my body in vain.
drink;	
暂伴月将影	行乐须及春
I'll stay with Moon and Shadow	To cavort while spring lasts.
我歌月徘徊	我舞影零乱
As I sing, Moon lingers;	As I dance, Shadow tangles.
醒时同交欢	醉后各分散
Sober, we keep good company;	Drunk, we part ways.
永结无情游	相期渺云汉
Tying an eternal knot with no string attached,	We shall meet beyond
the stars.	

The difference in agency between Li Bai's speaker and Marilyn Chin's speaker is pronounced. The male speaker, rhapsodic in his sublime solitude, is transfigured in Chin's poem into a miserable modern wife, who projects all her emotions onto the moon and her shadow. Like her shadow, she seems to be a self-effacing and acquiescent illegal immigrant (“No green card, no identity pass”) yoked to her spouse. Although the speakers in both poems personify the moon and the shadow, the male speaker in “Drinking Alone” always calls the shots, literally and figuratively: he takes the lead in drinking, singing, and dancing, disparaging the moon for being an inept

drinking companion and the shadow for being an impersonator. The female speaker in “Get Rid of the X,” conversely, seems diffident and obliging. While Li Bai’s speaker belittles the moon and the shadow, Chin’s speaker is the one who is being deprecated, resented, and disciplined.

This contrast may be attributed to gender difference. On one level the “drunk and anorectic” moon in the second stanza is a clever anthropomorphic metaphor that captures the waxing and waning of the moon. But anorexia nervosa is an eating disorder mostly afflicting young women under pressure to live up to the Barbie Doll image, who have to be willowy to please their boyfriends and lovers. Thus by merging the image of the moon and its cycles, a traditional subject for Chinese poetry, with the conceit of a moon ravaged by gendered standards of physical beauty and conveyed through the use of a modern clinical adjective, the Chinese American speaker may be revealing her own negative self-image, depression, eating disorder, and alcoholism. Similarly, the shadow’s annoyance at being a hanger-on betokens the speaker’s ambivalence toward her spouse and their enmeshment.

The marital problem is disclosed in the third stanza. The husband is apparently a novelist manqué who takes out his frustrations on his wife.⁹ The speaker, still projecting her own emotions onto inanimate objects (in this instance, the moon), mourns his writer’s block, either because she measures her own worth by his success or because she dreads the violence his thwarted literary ambition will unleash: “Tomorrow, he’ll return to beat me/ Blue—again, again and again.” This rhythmic description of repetitive battering is a far cry from the self-actualizing, *carpe diem* motif in Li Bai’s verse. In its stead is the prospect of endless pain and endless blue—in the senses of both bruising and melancholy.

In the poem’s last stanza, however, the “lunatic” influence of the moon is replaced by solar enlightenment. Unlike the Tang speaker, who hankers after a reunion in the galaxy with the moon and his shadow, Chin’s female speaker is bidding a long farewell to her husband and her shadowy lover after discovering her pregnancy (“I am late”). Passive throughout the first three stanzas, she initiates her first—and perhaps also final—move in the last line of the poem: “I must make my leap of faith.”

This ambiguous clincher is open to at least four interpretations. First,

Chin may be toying with another analogue. According to a popular legend, the drunken Poet Immortal drowned when he fell from a boat in his attempt to embrace the moon reflected in a lake. In this case, the possible allusion to his besotted leap hints at a possible suicide attempt by Chin's speaker, who may have determined to leave her conjugal prison (which recalls the assorted metaphors for domestic confines in "Song of the Sad Guitar") by jumping out of the window. "Faith," in this instance, could refer to the Buddhist belief in reincarnation. A second possibility is that she may be trying to induce an abortion by a fall. Alternatively, she may have resolved to take charge of her own life—to have "faith" in herself—by leaving her abusive husband and her self-denigrating alter ego. Finally, in a sense closely related to the previous scenario, she may be making her leap of faith as a poet. In this interpretation, Chin's speaker (unlike her unproductive husband and her mute shadow) has at last found her voice through the written word; she has "reported a crime" (to borrow Hong Kingston's idiosyncratic paraphrase of the Chinese idiom for "revenge") and composed a vengeful poem, appropriately entitled "Get Rid of the X."

This enigmatic title is likewise open to multiple conjectures. "X" most likely refers to an *ex*-husband or an *ex*-lover: the speaker is quitting both her violent husband and the maudlin moon. In the context of her pregnancy, "X" also may reference the genetics of sex: a female has two X chromosomes while a male has one X and one Y chromosome. Depending upon whether we opt for a suicidal or a prochoice interpretation, the speaker either is getting rid of herself (a female made up of two X chromosomes) or getting rid of a presumably female embryo; she either wishes to be reborn as a male herself or wishes her embryo to be male. Since the speaker never asks to be given a "Y," however, it is possible that she merely wants to dispose of the second X: to be reborn into a new sex entirely or to give birth to a child who does not carry any gender baggage.¹⁰

Both "Drinking Alone under the Moon" and "Get Rid of the X" celebrate a kind of self-sufficiency. But Chin's poem, in exposing domestic violence, deploring female dependence, and gesturing toward gender emancipation (through tinkering with sex chromosomes and adumbrating a lesbian ménage à trois with Moon and Shadow), plays fast and loose with the Tang poet's romantic reverie, much as Stone Orchid's dissident song tweaks the

trope of an ineluctable female condition that pervades “Ode to Pipa,” “The River-Merchant Wife,” and “An Immortal by the Lake.” Chin’s last line can thus be read as the poet’s flagrant attempt to turn up her nose at ancestral worship: to free herself from the anxiety of the Chinese classical influence in general and specifically from the grip of the Poet Immortal. In other words, with her slanted allusions and neologistic puns, Chin is signaling her own autonomy from Li Bai—to whose inebriating imagery she has issued a sobering riposte.

Significantly, both “Song of the Sad Guitar” and “Get Rid of the X” frame the speaker’s unhappy marriage within the context of Chinese immigration. This context presents the nuptial discord of the two poems in yet another register—allegorically, as an unfulfilled American Dream reflecting the collective experience of Chinese Americans historically. Indeed, in a long poem pointedly entitled “A Portrait of the Self as Nation, 1990–1991,” Chin uses the conceit of marriage to explicitly set forth a parallel between sexual and racial subordination: “This is the way you want me—/ asleep, quiescent, almost dead, sedated by lush immigrant dreams of global bliss, connubial harmony.”¹¹ These lines suggest that the stereotype of the Asian woman as a docile wife morphs easily into the stereotype of the Asian American as model minority—accepted and even touted by the dominant culture as long as it refrains from protesting against structural asymmetries in US society.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to elaborate on Chin’s unabashed embrace of the personal as the political throughout her extensive repertoire. Suffice it to note that she invokes “Drinking Alone under the Moon” out of neither nostalgia for the Orient nor enchantment with the Occident but to underscore the contrast between the Tang speaker’s masculine prerogative, which allows him to indulge in a solipsistic ecstasy, and her female persona’s material contingencies—including gender, citizenship, class, and sexuality.

Material contingencies and marginalized communities also manifest themselves in Russell Leong’s lyrics. In the following poem about the Chinese garden in the Huntington Library, raw materials—timber, rock, steel, water—are not merely the wherewithal for building the garden but are used by Leong to call up the workers who have contributed to Chinese and US architectural grandeur. Just as the artisans turn the raw materials into

intricate structures, Leong deftly handles these concrete images to construct a sedimentary verse:

“*Bie You Dong Tian: Another World Lies Beyond*”
(*from a carved lintel in the Huntington “Liu Fang Yuan” Chinese Garden*)

I.

Through

This gate you enter the Garden.

Dawn

The garden is not finished, but the feeling is already here.

Each step damp with dew descended from the Arroyo Seco.

Steel

Girders peep from under the wood columns of the tea pavilion.

An orange tractor rigs its taciturn arm, waiting.

A Latino security guard leans against the carved railing.

Chinese workmen from Suzhou have not yet arrived.

Miles

Away, in the Lincoln Plaza Hotel cafe

The workmen drink down their rice soup & steamed bread

(Wu, Ding, Yi—their family

Names—printed on orange work vests

And helmets they will don again today.)

Heron

Dips its beak into the green lake water.

Air moistens with rain, gray roof tiles

Blacken, incised petal patterns blur.

Rain

Gathers to the curved dip of 10,000 tiles. Silver

Rain threads onto 600 tons of Taihu rocks

Rivulets down the hillside to *Di Lü Ting* –

Small hut—named by a scholar for washing away thoughts.

II.

Thought

Always returns. From below

The hut’s thatched roof you can see

The San Gabriel peaks, this garden
Wholly formed in China, yet forming another America.

Beyond

Carved windows, among boulders
Of the Arroyo Seco, a man
Same heft as the workmen from Suzhou
Holds an abalone shell in his right hand.

Black

Eyes, sunburnt skin. Plain-clothed, blue and gray
Same colors as the men from Suzhou.
He places sage into the shell, what the Tongva do.

Nachochan

He whispers, then lifts the shell skyward.
“*You are new here. We have always been here.*

Yet now we share this place. Know

How many worlds live in this garden.”

Suzhou

Workmen arrive. They sense a far-off mountain
Yet do not recognize the foreign scent.
Vagrant herb or voracious dynamite left
On the cotton trousers of 10,000 Chinese workers
Who dug tunnels for Huntington’s Central Pacific?

Movement

By movement, through centuries
Ancient feelings converge here, carried
By Tongva, Chinese, Mexicans, Spanish
And Chinese again, who, in their labor
Become elemental with the Earth.

Bie You Dong Tian

Another world lies beyond.

Leong’s “Bie You Dong Tian” was written at the request of KUSC, a Los Angeles classical music station, to commemorate the opening on February 23, 2008, of the Suzhou-style Chinese garden—known as Liu Fang Yuan (流芳园)—on the grounds of the Huntington Library of Southern California. The Huntington Library is famous not only for its collections of rare

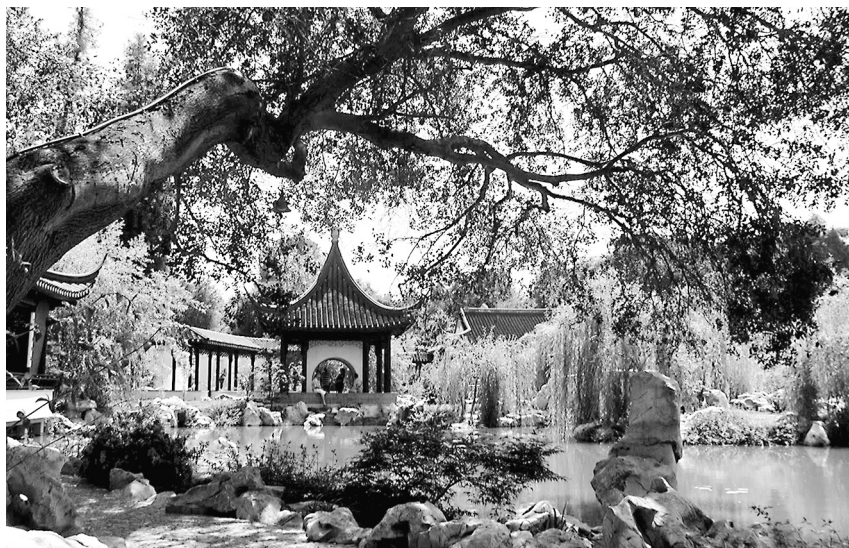


Figure 1 Liu Fang Yuan, Huntington Library. ©2009, Mary Uyematsu Kao

books and art but also for its spectacular botanical gardens, including the Desert Garden, the Rose Garden, the Shakespeare Garden, the Japanese Garden, and now the Chinese Garden (fig. 1).

Liu Fang Yuan, “where nature’s artistry and the spirit of poetry bloom in harmony,” according to a brochure for the Garden of Flowing Fragrance at the Huntington, is apparently one of the biggest Chinese gardens outside China and is meant to capture the grace and grandeur of that country’s ancient civilization. The construction of the garden took some ten years and cost over \$18 million. To approximate the authentic Suzhou style, the Huntington Library contacted the Suzhou Garden Development Co. in China, which supplied fifty craftsmen, eleven stone artisans, and much of the material for construction, including 850 tons of Taihu rocks.¹² The Chinese proverb 别有洞天 (*bieyou-dongtian*), along with its English translation, “Another world lies beyond,” appears on a wooden placard just outside the entrance to the garden. The proverb suggests a transition from a workaday milieu to an entrancing landscape or, perhaps, a transcendent Taoist heaven.

Leong uses the bilingual inscription on the placard as his title, but his poem deviates considerably from the indigenous significance of the proverb and probably also from the expectation of his radio patrons. Had they expected a paean about the picturesque Chinese garden, they would have been sorely disappointed. Despite the “exotic” title, the proverb’s trajectory from a quotidian to a rarefied domain is reversed in Leong’s poem, which moves from the magnificent exterior of the garden to less privileged habitats. Part 1 of the poem is infused with water imagery—dew, tea, soup, lake, rain, rivulets. This garden still is under construction: “Girders peep from under the wood columns of the tea pavilion. / An orange tractor rigs its taciturn arm, waiting.” The steel girders anticipate the railroad imagery in part 2, and the personified orange tractor heralds the arrival of the Suzhou craftsmen, clad in “orange work vests.” Leong, I believe, intentionally homes in on the unfinished garden so as to foreground the artisans rather than the product of their labor.

Liu Fang Yuan, erected in part on account of “the rise of China as an industrial and technological power,”¹³ opened in 2008 to coincide with that country’s hosting of the Olympic Games. Leong’s determination to blazon the work of migrant laborers thus has trans-Pacific reverberations. Just as most people who admired the Birds Nest or the Water Cube during the 2008 Olympics usually did not give thought to the invisible migrant hands that built those grand edifices, so visitors to the Huntington’s Chinese garden in California are unlikely to think of the Suzhou artisans who came all the way from China to complete the landmark project.

To counter such oblivion, Leong sedulously fleshes out these workers, zeroing in on their simple diet and work uniform: “The workmen drink down their rice soup & steamed bread / (Wu, Ding, Yi—their family / Names—printed on orange work vests / And helmets they will don again today.)”¹⁴ These details decidedly shift the focus from the stately garden to the humble craftsmen. As in Chin’s “Song of the Sad Guitar,” naming confers identities. Moreover, the description of the workers’ plain fare, resisting what Frank Chin calls “food pornography” (the exploitation of the “exotic” aspects of Chinese food to gain popular appeal), further familiarizes the artisans to the readers.¹⁵

The last two stanzas of part 1 limn idyllic scenes of a heron drinking

from a green lake and rain seeping into Taihu rocks. The last two lines of this section inform us that the lake and the hut in the garden are meant to provide a respite from mental activity: “Rivulets down the hillside to *Di Lü Ting*—/ Small hut—named by a scholar for washing away thoughts.” But even in the midst of this lyrical evocation, the speaker hammers home the realities of the garden’s painstaking construction by trotting out such figures as “600 tons of Taihu rocks” and “10,000 tiles”—the latter number connecting these imported materials to the “10,000 Chinese workers,” also imported from China, of part 2.

The emphasis on physical labor in part 1 thus provides a fitting overture to part 2, in which the speaker connects the Suzhou artisans with the Tongva (Native American) people whose lands were taken away by Euro-American colonizers, with the Mexicans who now supply the bulk of the labor force in Southern California and whose lands were similarly removed by Anglo-American colonizers, as well as with the early Chinese emigrants who built the transcontinental railroad. Here, Earth imagery replaces the water motifs of part 1. The various ethnic groups in this section are linked not by the highbrow culture of the literati emblemized by the Chinese garden but rather by having “*black*/Eyes, sunburnt skin” and being “plain-clothed, blue and gray” folks “who, in their labor / Become elemental with the Earth.”

Leong’s poem deflects and transforms the original intent of such Chinese expressions as “*Bie you dong tian*,” “*Di lü ting*” (滌慮亭), and “*Liu fang yuan*” (流芳園). First, the Chinese proverb that promises to lure visitors away from pedestrian environs to an Oriental Eden is instead used to bring into focus the daily labor behind the splendid artifact. *Dong tian* (洞天) (literally, “tunnel sky”) also alludes to the course of a railway, summoning images of laborers digging tunnels and the movement of a train from a dark tunnel back out under the open sky. Instead of referring to the Taoist paradise for immortals, *dong tian* here encodes a haunting ground for the wandering apparitions of Chinese railroad workers, many of whom died while producing one of the engineering marvels of their time, having routinely been given the dangerous task of handling explosives during the construction of the Southern Pacific Railroad.

Di lü ting (literally, “mind-cleansing pavilion”), “named by a scholar”

as a “[pavilion] for washing away thoughts,” actually is used in the poem to percolate them, inviting reflections about subjugated civilizations and the confluence of past and present, East and the West: “From below / The hut’s thatched roof you can see / The San Gabriel peaks, this garden / Wholly formed in China, yet forming another America.” We are reminded—“Moment / By moment, century by century”—of the less glorious chapters of US and Chinese history, from the nineteenth century’s displacement of Native Americans and maltreatment of Chinese railroad builders to the current exploitation of migrant laborers in both the United States and China. Rather than offering a retreat from mundane affairs, the shelter triggers in the speaker an epiphany about accountability and solidarity across time, delivered in the voice of a member of the Tongva people: “*You are new here. We have always been here. / Yet now we share this place.*”

The name “Liu fang yuan” (literally, “Garden of Flowing Fragrance”) is purposely redolent of the Chinese garden’s many trees and flowers. Instead of capturing such an aroma, however, the poem invites the reader and the Suzhou workmen to sniff the “foreign scent. / Vagrant herb or voracious dynamite left / On the cotton trousers of 10,000 Chinese workers / Who dug tunnels for Huntington’s Central Pacific.” This olfactory slippage steers us from the pleasant scenery of the present to a harrowing past. *Vagrant* is a zeugma referring at once to a herb transplanted from China and to the nomadic existence of the minority groups that have set foot on or been dislodged from the land on which the Huntington gardens’ ornate structures now stand. Similarly, *voracious* not only denotes the destructive power of dynamite that made the Central Pacific possible but also connotes the countless Chinese lives devoured by those explosions. Here, the rocks in the garden are indeed conducive to creativity, but they do not conjure up placid images of nature at rest, instead recalling the cascades of rocks and stones touched off by explosives that left many workers buried in the garden’s vicinity.

Leong’s pungent wordplay also brings to mind another association with the garden’s name, since *liu fang* 流芳 (flowing fragrance) also can mean “to leave an honorable name,” as in the proverb “*liufang-baishi*” 流芳百世 (“Leave a good name for a hundred generations”). The Huntington Library, founded in 1919, is named after Henry Edwards Huntington (1850–1927),

whose eponymous legacy includes a beach, a park, a hotel, a hospital, and a middle school. Huntington seems, at first glance, to have succeeded in leaving his good name behind. But a somewhat shady association with that name lurks in Leong's poem, for Henry was the nephew of Collis P. Huntington, a railroad magnate and one of the Big Four who participated in the creation of the transcontinental railway. Henry himself held several key positions working alongside his uncle with the Southern Pacific. It was in the course of toiling for the Huntingtons under treacherous conditions that many Chinese railroad builders perished. Significantly, the antonymous proverb that often is juxtaposed with "*liufang-baishi*" is "*yichou-wannian*" (遗臭万年): "leaving a bad odor for ten thousand years." In evoking the scent of explosives and conjuring up casualties, Leong's poem—far from paying homage to Huntington—emits an unpleasant whiff of dynamite and death, standing as a memorial to the many Chinese, Mexican, Latino, and Native American workers who labored anonymously in the San Gabriel Valley. That, too, is part of the Huntington legacy.

While Leong's radio hosts probably expected him to write an occasional poem transporting listeners to fabled Cathay, he resists the opportunity at every turn, though he incorporates enough lyrical tidbits and Chinese allusions to tantalize his readers. His sinophone allusions are grounded in historical sedimentation, imbricating and implicating both China and the United States in the exploitation of migrant laborers; his Liu Fang Yuan is a "garden / Wholly formed in China, yet forming another America." The Chinese-box structure undergirding Chin's "Song of the Sad Guitar" also is discernible in this poem. Just as "there were courts, more courts and innermost courts" in Chin's verse, beyond Leong's seductive title "*Bie You Dong Tian*" lies an ornamental garden that contains the workaday world of the Latino security guard, the sorrows of displaced people such as the Tongva and the Mexicans, and labors of the Suzhou migrants and their Chinese forefathers—not those who loitered in a sixteenth-century Chinese garden in Suzhou, but rather those who have sacrificed the most and benefited least in building America. Contradicting the scholar who fancies the *di lü ting* to be the perfect niche for cleansing the mind, Leong points out the garden's associative fecundity, which jostles our memories of the unsung earthly laborers of diverse worlds.

The policing of Orientalism and the demand for fidelity to the Chinese original in Chinese American writing have been so intense on both sides of the Pacific that any references to China are scrutinized with suspicion. What such critics often leave unscanned is the aesthetic and oppositional deployment of Chinese tropes. While Zhao rightly deplores the market forces that have predisposed some writers to include superficially “exotic” content in their works, his injunction to counter Orientalism by focusing on the “American world” and confining critical attention to “non-Chinese subject matter” is counterproductive.¹⁶ Such a solution implies that Chinese and US inheritance can always be bifurcated for US citizens of Chinese descent and that the influence of traditional Chinese culture has no place in the United States. But there never has been a pure “American world.” In Edward Said’s words, “As an immigrant-settler society superimposed on the ruins of considerable native presence, American identity is too varied to be a unitary and homogeneous thing.”¹⁷ Leong’s poem neatly exemplifies this point.

Because the ancestral cultures of immigrants are very much a part of the United States, for Chinese American writers and critics to quarantine Chinese topics borders on self-denial, a form of censorship that can only impoverish (Asian-) American literary studies. Not only is recognition of this influence important to an accurate understanding of history, but transnational resonances should be amplified rather than repressed in today’s rapidly globalizing world. Critics can best combat Orientalism not by declaring a moratorium on traditional Chinese tropes but rather by examining the inventive and subversive uses of Chinese sources—uses that may, in fact, challenge the supremacy of the Western heritage in the New World, as well as the cultural dominant in both Sinophone and Anglophone nations.

In the works of hyphenated US writers who have at their disposal two mother tongues, the interweaving of those languages can tell us much about the authors’ reservations and hopes regarding both their ancestral and adopted countries.¹⁸ In Chin’s and Leong’s work, the provocative amalgamation of bilingual discourse amounts to formal insurrection. Both poets resort to linguistic legerdemain to convey their critique of US and Chinese cultures. In “Song of the Sad Guitar,” Chin orchestrates multiple allusions—to “Ode to Pipa,” “An Immortal by the Lake,” “The River-Merchant’s Wife,” and *The Woman Warrior*—to syncretize a prose poem that urges women to

break out of the domestic prisons depicted in Chinese classical literature and resurfacing in US suburbia. In “Get Rid of the X,” she uses bicultural juxtaposition, parody, and puns to depict an abject female alien yoked to an abusive husband as well as cabined, cribbed, and confined by US immigration laws. In creating a female speaker who differs markedly from the insouciant patriarch in Li Bai’s drinking poem, Chin departs from the lyricism of Tang verse to pitch a piquant utterance of her own. Similarly, Leong skews the conventional meanings of Chinese tropes to extract semantic elements that reverberate with the migrant experience, digging beneath the resplendent Chinese garden in Southern California to ferret out buried chapters of transnational history. These two writers’ slanted allusions insinuate against both Chinese and US ideological norms. Unpacking their hybrid rhetorical strategies enhances our appreciation of their artistry and oblique political critique.

Notes

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1. Zhao Wenshu, “Why Is There Orientalism in Chinese American Literature?,” in *Global Perspectives on Asian American Literature* (Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2007), 256. For criticism of the authors mentioned, see Frank Chin, “Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake,” in *The Big Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers*, ed. Jeffery Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong (New York: New American Library-Meridian, 1991), 1–92; Sheng-Mei Ma, *Deathly Embrace: Orientalism and Asian American Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); and Yan Ying (应雁), “The ‘Authentic’ Voice in Neo-Orientalism: The Works of Ha Jin” (新东方主义中的“真实”声音:论哈金的作品), *Foreign Literature Review* (当代外国文学) (Beijing) 1 (2004): 31–37.
2. Chin, “Real and the Fake,” 32–51. Cf. Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, eds., *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974; repr., Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1983), ix–x. I have taken issues with Chin in “Art, Spirituality, and the Ethic of Care: Alternative Masculinities in Chinese American Literature,” in *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory*, ed. Judith Kegan Gardiner (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 261–89; “Of Men and Men: Reconstructing Chinese American Masculinity,” in *Other Sisterhoods: Literary Theory and U.S. Women of Color*,

- ed. Sandra Kumamoto Stanley (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 173–99; and “*The Woman Warrior* versus *The Chinaman Pacific*: Must a Chinese American Critic Choose between Feminism and Heroism?,” in *Conflicts in Feminism*, ed. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (New York: Routledge, 1990), 234–51.
3. Since the completion of this article and its acceptance by *positions* four years ago, there have been happy exceptions: Timothy Yu, *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry since 1965* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009); Steven G. Yao, *Foreign Accents: Chinese American Verse from Exclusion to Postethnicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); see also Xiaojing Zhou, *The Ethics and Poetics of Alterity in Asian American Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006); and Dorothy Wang, *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).
 4. Marilyn Chin, “Song of the Sad Guitar,” in *The Phoenix Gone, the Terrace Empty* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 1994), 25; Marilyn Chin, “Get Rid of the X,” in *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow: Poems* (New York: Norton, 2002), 45; Russell C. Leong, “Bie You Dong Tian: Another World Lies Beyond,” *KUSC Newsletter* (March 2008), reprinted in *Amerasia Journal* 37, no. 1 (2011): 41–42.
 5. Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1976; repr., New York: Random, 1977), 62–63.
 6. “An Interview with Marilyn Chin,” *Indiana Review* 26, no. 1 (2004): 113; “转风: 梁志英访谈录,” 单德兴, 《“开疆”与“辟土”——美国华裔文学与文化: 作家访谈录与研究论文集》。天津: 南开大学出版社, 2006 (“Phoenix in Transit: An Interview with Russell Leong,” in *Exploration and Expansion of the Frontiers of Chinese American Literature and Culture: A Collection of Interviews and Research Papers*, ed. Te-hsing Shan (Tianjin: Nankai University Press, 2006), 278).
 7. All translations of Chinese verses into English are mine unless otherwise stated.
 8. Another allusion to Li Bai and Pound is found in Stone Orchid’s song: “women climbing watchtower” echoes “Why should I climb the lookout?”
 9. As a poet, Chin is also “slyly commenting on the dominance of the novel over poetry” in the contemporary western world (e-mail correspondence with author, March 14, 2009).
 10. The protagonist in Marilyn Chin’s “Parable of the Guitar” imagines a novel in which the denizens are “highly efficient creatures, each equipped with both a vagina and a penis for self-procreation.” See *The Revenge of Mooncake Vixen: A Manifesto in Forty-One Tales* (New York: Norton, 2009), 193.
 11. Marilyn Chin, “A Portrait of the Self as Nation, 1990–1991,” in *Phoenix Gone*. For an insightful analysis of the poem, see Yao, *Foreign Accents*, 209–16.
 12. Erik Skindrud, “Liu Fang Yuan—Garden of Flowing Fragrance, a Chinese Gem: Ancient Landscape Art Comes to Southern California,” LandscapeOnline.com, <http://www.landscapeonline.com/research/article/10862> (accessed April 20, 2013).
 13. *Ibid.*

14. Leong discloses that Wu Ding Yi actually is the Chinese name of Bill Wu, to whom the poem is dedicated (e-mail correspondence to author, April 20, 2010).
15. Frank Chin, *The Chickencoop Chinaman and The Year of the Dragon: Two Plays* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981), 86; see also Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 58–65.
16. Zhao, “Orientalism,” 256.
17. Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), xxix.
18. Ha Jin has observed (feeling I believe, on account of his own circumstances as an expatriate) that for many migrant writers, “homeland is actually their mother tongues.” See Ha Jin, *The Writer as Migrant* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 78.