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## **Chinese and Chinese American Life-Writing \***

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**Abstract:**

Through a comparison of Chinese and Chinese American (auto)biographical accounts, this article facilitates a transpacific literary exchange that tracks cultural persistence and diffusion, offers a transnational perspective on the alleged absence of indigenous Chinese autobiography and the controversial use of fake “Orientalist” material in Chinese American life-writing, and highlights the need for bicultural literacy in grappling with this literature. Contesting Frank Chin’s categorical condemnation of autobiography (as a Western Christian contraption laden with self-hatred), I trace its manifestations in transpacific texts and the convergences in those texts: melding of autobiography and biography, salience of maternal legacies, and interdependent self-formation. Unlike the Chinese authors who lavish compliments on their forebears, however, the Chinese American authors do not scruple to disclose unseemly family secrets or to defy the boundaries between history and fiction—practices that some Asian American critics find vexing. I demonstrate that the critical qualms about Chinese American life-writing have to do with the politics of representation and that bicultural literacy can obviate cultural misreading.

**Key Words:** Autobiography, Memoir, Biographical fiction, Chinese and Chinese American literature, Shen Congwen, Frank Chin, Maxine Hong Kingston, William Poy Lee, Ruthanne Lum McCunn

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In an essay entitled “This Is Not An Autobiography” Frank Chin—an outspoken Chinese American writer, playwright, critic and one of the pioneers of Asian American literary studies—denounces Chinese American autobiography as a “peculiarly Christian literary weapon” that has “destroyed Chinamen history and culture.”<sup>1</sup> He asserts that whereas “Chinese civilization is founded on history” (115), Western civilization is based on religion, and that the church and state are two sides of the same coin demanding the submission of the individual. Referring to Yung Wing (容宏)’s *My Life in China and America*, he asserts: “The first Chinese-American autobiography in English appears in 1909, by a missionary boy.... The first Chinese language autobiography of any kind appears in 1920. The Christian Chinese American autobiography is the only Chinese American literary tradition” (109).

Chin’s hostile response toward the genre has to do with the ways in which early Chinese American writers have had to employ autobiography as a means to be published and read by a mainstream audience (see Wong 1992). Writing by Chinese Americans (and arguably by any ethnic American) tends to be read as ethnography, representative of the author or the author’s presumed community, so that gaining a mainstream readership could mean having to subject oneself to its patronizing gaze, an act analogous to Christian confession. As Traise Yamamoto observes, autobiographical writing from the late nineteenth century through approximately 1940 “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” (2014: 380). The refrain of Asian backwardness or quaintness and Western or American enlightenment can be heard in many of the early examples of Asian American autobiography.

Just because these prototypes of Asian American life-writing accommodate the tastes of American mainstream audiences, this should not occasion a wholesale denunciation of the genre, however. I take issue with Chin’s claims that there is no indigenous autobiographical tradition in China and that the deployment of autobiography is inescapably dubious on the ground that it is a Christian contraption laden with “perpetual self-contempt and redemption, self-hatred and forgiveness, confession” (112). Many Chinese autobiographical works, such as the postscript to the *Shiji/Shih-chi* (史记) (c. 91 BC) by historian Xima Qian/Suu-ma Ch’ien (司马迁) and “The Life of the Sire of Five Willows (五柳先生传)” (AD 392) by poet Tao Yuanming (陶渊明), predated St. Augustine’s *Confessions* (AD 398), which Chin considers to be the Ur-autobiography. Even if we fast-forward to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, “My Autobiographical Account at Thirty (三十自述)” by Liang Qichao (梁启超), the Chinese reformer on whose head the Empress Dowager put a price, was written in 1902, seven years before the publication of Yung Wing’s autobiography.

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<sup>1</sup> “This Is Not An Autobiography,” *Genre* 18 (Summer): 109. All citations of Chin are to this text unless otherwise stated. For an award-winning biographical documentary on Chin, see *What’s Wrong with Frank Chin?* (2005), directed by Curtis Choy.

My intent in bringing up this decades-old contention by Chin is not simply to refute his claim that there is no Chinese autobiography, nor to revisit his vehement denunciation of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and the ensuing debate among Asian American literary scholars, but to usher in a transpacific exchange that can illuminate cultural persistence and diffusion, cast new light on some pertinacious controversies (sparked by Chin) in Asian American literary studies, and reiterate (albeit with a difference) another point made by Chin in the same essay—the need for bicultural literacy, a plea eclipsed by his diatribe against autobiography. Juxtaposing three pre-World War II Chinese works—Liang Qichao's "My Autobiographical Account at Thirty," Hu Shih (胡适)'s "An Autobiographical Account at Forty (四十自述)" (1933), and Shen Congwen (沈从文)'s *Autobiography* (从文自传) (1934)—with three postwar Chinese American works—*The Woman Warrior* (1976), William Poy Lee's *The Eighth Promise* (2007), and Ruthanne Lum McCunn's *Wooden Fish Songs* (1995)—this essay uncovers some marked similarities and disjunctures between the two clusters, offers a transnational perspective on the controversial fusion of fact and fiction and the use of Orientalist material in Chinese American writing, and makes a case for bicultural literacy. The first part of this essay traces the convergences and divergences of Chinese and Chinese American life-writing. I attribute the generic fusion of autobiography and the salience of maternal legacy in these works to cultural persistence in the form of an interdependent self; I trace the different approaches to family history—respectful and laudatory versus unabashedly frank—to a diminishing cultural hold across the Pacific. The second part demonstrates, through a comparative examination of Shen's autography with its Chinese American counterparts, the subversive use of auto(biography) in articulating a distinctive ethnic subjectivity. The third part contends that the critical controversies concerning the mingling of fact and fiction and the use of exotic material in Asian American writing stem largely from the politics of representation and that multicultural literacy can obviate cultural misreading.

Before monitoring transpacific convergences and divergences, the differences within each group should first be noted. Liang (1873-1929), Hu (1891-1962), and Shen (1902-1988) were all eminent Chinese intellectuals. Liang, a political reformer and philosopher who advocated Western reform during the reign of the last Qing emperor, had to flee for his life when the Empress Dowager launched a coup. Hu was a philosopher, a vanguard in the movement promoting the use of vernacular Chinese in literature, and later Republic of China's ambassador to the U.S. (1938-1942); he studied under John Dewey at Columbia and became a lifelong advocate of pragmatism. Shen was a prolific writer whose career came to a tragic halt in 1949, when his works were banned on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. Under the Communist regime he went through a political purge (in which he was publicly attacked in big character posters and his books burned), a mental breakdown, and a failed suicide attempt. Of all the modern Chinese writers Shen, who was of partial Miao descent, was most attuned to ethnic sensibility and "native soil" or local color.<sup>2</sup> Mo Yan, the 2012 Nobel laureate, compares himself with Shen:

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<sup>2</sup> See Xinjian Xu (2009) for an overview of multiethnic literature in China.

“I left school as a child and had no books to read. But for those reasons, like the writer of a previous generation, Shen Congwen, I had an early start on reading the great book of life” (2012). Shen himself was twice nominated for the Nobel Prize in literature, in 1980 and 1988 and slated to win in 1988, but he died (at age 85) before it could be awarded. He would have been the first Chinese writer to receive the award.

The three Chinese autobiographical accounts vary in content and style. Liang’s somewhat stilted treatise says less about the author than about his illustrious teachers and peers. The author acknowledges his debts to his various mentors, especially Kang Youwei/K’ang Yu-wei (康有为) (1858-1927), political thinker and reformer of the late Qing Dynasty, and painstakingly catalogues all their students. Hu’s account, written in vernacular Chinese, is much more personal than Liang’s in tone. He stresses how specific events and people shaped his intellectual development and how an individual may serve as an index of the time. Shen’s autobiography, which describes his youthful encounters in Feng Huang (凤凰), his hometown in western Hunan, is much more literary than Liang’s and Hu’s and is replete with colorful and astonishing anecdotes. In China, Liang’s account is classified as autobiography and Shen’s as literary autobiography, with Hu’s open to debate as to which category it should fall under. I select these three texts because they were published before 1949 and the maelstrom that unhinged the Chinese literary tradition in the wake of the Communist Revolution.

Kingston (1940-), Lee (1951-), and McCunn (1946-) are known primarily as writers, though Kingston has achieved international fame since the publication of *The Woman Warrior* (1976). Former Presidential Press Secretary Bill Moyers noted in his interview with her in 2007 that this memoir and its sequel *China Men* “are the most widely taught books by a living author on college campuses today” (Tucher 11); in 1997 she was awarded the National Humanities Medal by President Bill Clinton. Lee is a lawyer/banker turned writer. *The Eighth Promise* is a dual memoir (of the author and his mother) in which family history is interwoven with tumultuous national and international events; the title refers to the promise extracted by the author’s grandmother from his mother to be compassionate to everyone. McCunn, a Eurasian of Chinese and Scottish descent, has authored numerous Chinese American biographical vignettes and five biographical novels. *Wooden Fish Songs*, one of the five, is about Lue Gim Gong (1858-1925), a horticulturist from Southern China. It is included in my discussion because it instantiates a transnational and interracial approach to life-writing. These three works are published during or after the civil rights and Asian American movements; like Frank Chin, Kingston, Lee, and McCunn exhibit a certain ethnic pride that was relatively absent in earlier Chinese American writing.

The appeal of the autobiographical accounts by Liang and Hu, on account of their statures as public intellectuals, is quite different from that of the other four works, whose fascination is in part ethnographical. This difference is a critical one when it comes to the politics of representation mentioned earlier. Readers who read Liang and Hu, like those who study Benjamin Franklin, do so on account of the stature of the autobiographer, and perhaps also for

the purpose of edification. Those who read Shen are drawn by his literary acclaim and regional flavor. Readers, especially non-Asians, who read Kingston, Lee, and even McCunn, in part for ethnographic reasons, may assume that their work is representative of the ethnic group, much in the way *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass* tells about slavery. (Behind the assumption also lies a certain condescension that American writers of Asian descent are only capable of unmediated representations and are not creative enough to venture beyond their own life experiences.) This presumption is especially misleading vis-à-vis Chinese American life-writing because of the heterogeneity of the originary culture, immigrant history, individual experience, and narrative strategy.

The tendency to read Asian American life-writing as transparent ethnography and the lack of bicultural literacy in the American reading public explain in part the divided reception of *The Woman Warrior*, which was widely taught not only in literature but also in anthropology classes, as though the book were a window to the ethnic community. While many critics praise the memoir for breaking new frontiers in the tradition of American autobiography, the very strategies considered innovative, such as the combination of fact and fantasy and the juxtaposition of historical and legendary figures, sit ill with a number of scholars from China as well as Asian Americanists, particularly Frank Chin, who accuses Kingston of faking Chinese tradition in rewriting the tale of Mulan (110). In his prefatory essay to the *The Big Aiiieeeee!* entitled “Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake,” Chin argues that “myths are, by nature, immutable and unchanging because they are deeply ingrained in the cultural memory, or they are not myths”; to uphold Kingston’s fakery, he reprinted “The Ballad of Mulan” (木兰诗) within his essay as though the Chinese poem were the “real” that had not gone through revisions (1991: 4, 29).

Elsewhere, other critics and I have defended Kingston against Chin’s unrelenting attack (see Cheung 1988, 1990, 1993; Wong 1992). Suffice it to say here that I do not think that autobiographical accounts are automatically suspect, a ploy to satisfy marketing demands and mainstream audiences’ curiosity. We should heed James Clifford’s caveat that the traditional belief in the transparency of ethnography has crumbled, that “culture is composed of seriously contested codes and representations, and that “the poetic and the political are inseparable” (1986: 2). Thus Asian American critics who discredit Kingston for misrepresenting her culture are, as Sau-ling Cynthia Wong points out, no less guilty than non-Asian readers in presuming that life-writing by an ethnic writer must be transparent: “Demanding ‘representativeness,’ the Chinese-American critics of Kingston differ from the white literary tourists only in the version of cultural authenticity subscribed to” (Wong 1992: 265). In Shen’s autobiography and the memoirs by Kingston and Lee, as well as McCunn’s biographical novel, poetics and politics are thoroughly interwoven to illuminate a marginalized cultural tradition, articulate a distinctive ethnic sensibility, and foster social awareness. Familiarity with both Chinese literary tradition and Chinese American history is conducive, if not essential, to an informed appreciation of Chinese American literature.

## I

There are several noteworthy points of convergence between Chinese and Chinese American life-writing. The works by the six authors all blur the line between autobiography and biography and proclaim a maternal legacy. These similarities suggest cultural persistence rather than Christian influence. While Chin claims that autobiography has no precedents in ancient China and imputes the subordination of the self in Chinese American autobiography to Christianity, Yu-ning Li, the editor of *Two Self-Portraits: Liang Ch'i-Ch'ao and Hu Shih*, traces the genre back to the Han Dynasty and gives a different reason for the writer's self-effacement:

Though far rarer (than biography), autobiography also had early beginnings, and has been traced to the Han historian Suu-ma Ch'ien's well-known postface to the *Shih-chi* (史记 c. 91 BC)... But cultural expectations, such as modesty, reticence about *one's abilities and achievements, and even self-deprecation, as well as keeping family affairs private, placed severe restrictions on the development.* (Li 1992: 8, my emphasis)

These cultural expectations have kept the self from being the centerpiece in the Chinese and, I believe, also Chinese American works, as evinced by the merging of autobiography and biography and the placement of personal narrative within a broader sociohistorical context. "Neither Liang nor Hu made a theoretical distinction between the principles of biography and the principles of autobiography," observed Li (1992: 9). He ascribes Liang's catalogues of his mentors and their students to an investment in group membership: "people are important not for their individual characteristics or actions, but for ... their participation in collective actions" (Li 1992:12). The "I" in Liang's and Hu's accounts, in Shen's autobiography, as well as in Kingston's and Lee's memoirs, is either overshadowed by or jostles against other members of the family, or historical and legendary figures.

The collectivist self noted by Li is akin to what cultural psychologists call "interdependent self," as expounded by Gish Jen in her recent book of essays entitled *Tiger Writing: Art, Culture, and the Interdependent Self*:

(There are) two very different models of self-construal. The first—the "independent," individualistic self—stresses uniqueness, defines itself via inherent attributes such as its traits, abilities, values, and preferences, and tends to see things in isolation. The second—the "interdependent," collectivist self—stresses commonality, defines itself via its place, roles, loyalties, and duties, and tends to see things in context. (Jen 2013: 7)

Jen associates the first with American culture and the second with Chinese culture, but she is quick to add that between these two lies "a continuum along which most people are located" and that individuals do not always abide by these "cultural templates" (7).

The generic fusion of autobiography and biography in the two clusters of texts nevertheless attests to the persistence of the collectivist or interdependent self, particularly the vital impact of maternal figures in self-formation. The works by Hu, Shen, and the three Chinese American writers all amplify filiation. The first, arguably the best, chapter of Hu's "Autobiographical Account" is devoted entirely to his mother's betrothal and subsequent widowhood; it is therefore, strictly speaking, a biography, and one that subverts patriarchal pedigree. *Autobiography* by Shen focuses not only on his immediate but also on his extended family, especially its Miao branch. In the chapter "My Family (我的家庭)," he traces his Miao ancestry through his grandmother; because of her low Miao status she is sent away by his family to a remote region once she has given birth to two sons. In reclaiming his ethnic provenance Shen has chosen to identify with his forsaken grandmother rather than with his powerful grandfather, an official under the Manchu government. Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* features five kindred and legendary women. The narrator boldly recreates—against paternal injunction—a matrilineal tradition by casting her no-name aunt, her mother, Mulan, and poet T'sai Yen as her "forerunners." She sees her mother as her Muse: "I too am in the presence of a great power, my mother talking story" (19-20). *The Eighth Promise* is expressly Lee's "Tribute to His Toisanese Mother"—the memoir's subtitle. His memoir, told in alternate voices of mother and son, maintains that his mother's Toisanese tradition has enabled his family to survive the tragedy of his brother's conviction of homicide: "This is the story of my mother as my greatest wisdom teacher...the story of how (her) Eighth Promise kept the ways of Toisan strong within us through life's ten thousand joys and ten thousand sorrows" (5).

Kingston's and Lee's memoirs belie Chin's denunciation of autobiography as inevitably imbued with self-abjection. On the contrary, these memoirs pay deep homage to ancestral, especially maternal, heritage and resound to the drumbeat of the Asian American movement of the seventies in asserting a distinct ethnic consciousness. On this score it is especially puzzling that Chin singles out *The Woman Warrior* as instantiating Christian self-contempt because it is arguably one of the first works that breaks away from an earlier Asian American autobiographical tradition that stresses overcoming ethnic obstacles in order to assimilate into American culture. In Colleen Lye's words,

*The Woman Warrior's* Asian Americanness has to do with Kingston's reworking of the characteristic form of intergenerational conflict narratives by earlier U.S. authors of Asian descent. Whereas earlier texts had tended to dichotomize immigrant and U.S.-born generations, *The Woman Warrior* mirrors as well as contrasts mother and daughter. Rather than representing a blocking figure that the youthful protagonist must leave or destroy...the mother here is a resource. ... Even going so far as to romanticize the "voice of Asia," which represents not just a residual past to be left behind but a renewable resource for the future. (Lye 2014: 215)

No less generative is the mother figure, as cultural transmitter and enduring resource, in *The Eighth Promise*. Even more conspicuously than Kingston, Lee—who according to his memoir



participated personally in the San Francisco State University's demonstrations for the establishment of Ethnic Studies, openly acknowledges the impact of the civil rights and the Asian American movements in inculcating ethnic consciousness. These autobiographical works not only pay tribute to Chinese culture but also show how the originary culture allows the authors to forge a distinctive Chinese American subjectivity that is oppositional to the dominant culture. Far from exemplifying Christian confession, these works decenter Western ways of seeing and being.

*Wooden Fish Songs*, told from the points of view of three women—the mother in China, the white adoptive “mother” in the United States, and an African American maid (who later becomes a voluntary caregiver)—similarly uses female voices to undermine patriarchal and Eurocentric views. Early Chinese American history has tended to focus on the predominant male population living in California Chinatowns. This historical novel indicates that early Chinese immigrants are not all members of “bachelor societies,” that women are fully influential in the immigrants' lives, and that their voices are essential and irreplaceable for filling in those details never recorded in official annals. McCunn thus practices what Jenny Sharpe describes in a different context as “literary archeology”—the process by which an author (or critic) reconstructs “a range of subjectivities from the fragmentary appearance of slave women in the historical records” (Sharpe 2003: xiv). In doing so, McCunn sedulously and imaginatively pieces together the lives of her three female narrators from sketchy historical and legal documents. The salience of female genealogy is both a striking trans-Pacific correspondence reflecting interdependence and a pronounced deviation from patrilineal conventions. The emphasis on maternal influence by Hu, Shen, Kingston, Lee, and McCunn could be seen as a calculated attempt on the part of these authors to write against the dominant patriarchal grain.

Having explored the parallel fusion of autobiography and biography and matrilineal discourse in these texts, I now turn to their divergent treatment of family history. Liang and Hu magnify the creditable aspects. Li observes, “everything (Liang) says about his family is complimentary” (1992:11). Although Hu frowns on the “requisite encomium” (Li 1992:11), he also pays effusive homage to his mother:

I lived under my mother's guidance for nine years, and was profoundly influenced by her.... If I have learned one thread, one strand of good disposition, if I have learned a little how to treat people and accept events with dispassion and understanding, if I am able to forgive and sympathize with others, I must thank my loving mother. (1992: 78)

By contrast, the Chinese American writers do not scruple to pull the plug on family secrets, including maternal escapades. Kingston reveals the rape (or consensual sexual liaison) of her father's sister as well as the mental breakdown of her mother's sister. Lee discloses not only his brother's conviction but also his mother's protracted love affair with a family friend. Such illicit or unseemly particulars concerning kinsfolk are seldom broadcast in Chinese autobiography, which routinely abides by the traditional precept to “keep family scandals from

leaking out (家丑不出外传).” Because of the prevalence of ethnographic fallacy, the inclusion of such tidbits in Chinese American writing often rouses consternation among fellow Asian Americans who deem such material to be “Orientalist.” The anxiety is less about its circulation within the ethnic community than about its reception in the mainstream, its exposure to the non-Asian public. Yet to expect Chinese American writers to be constantly on guard against the impressions non-Asians may get from their work (lest they incur censure from fellow ethnics) is surely a form of censorship. Furthermore, to suppress cultural difference so as to escape the stereotype of being a perpetual foreigner is to underwrite the most hegemonic form of assimilation.

## II

In terms of a deliberate evocation of ethnic sensibility, cultural identification, and social awareness, Shen’s *Autobiography* is a remarkable precursor to the Chinese American texts. As an author of mixed Han and Miao descent, Shen takes pains to present the peculiar practices of his ethnic community. In “What I Witness during Qingxiang (清乡所见),” a chapter about purging the village of “vile” elements (the meaning of “Qingxiang”), he remembers an incident involving a young tofu vendor who had disinterred a young girl from her grave and spent three nights with the body before returning it to the coffin. He was arrested and sentenced to death. Just before his execution, young Shen asked him why he slept with the corpse; the vendor just smiled as though the inquirer were too callow to understand love, and then muttered, “Exquisite, exquisite” (105).<sup>3</sup> This incident left an indelible impression on the author.

Outlandish descriptions are also found in the three American texts. Ghosts of all kinds haunt *The Woman Warrior*. The first chapter, “No Name Woman,” revolves around the ruthless persecution of an aunt who allegedly committed adultery and subsequently drowned herself in a family well. “My aunt haunts me—her ghost drawn to me because now, after fifty years of neglect, I alone devote pages of paper to her,” the narrator confides in the chapter’s concluding paragraph (16). *The Eighth Promise* describes in detail the Toisanese nuptials between the author’s parents and many Chinese New Year rituals, numerous recipes for “qi soup” requiring rare ingredients, as well as practices associated with the indigenous clan sisterhood. *Wooden Fish Songs*, like *The Woman Warrior*, recounts many supernatural visitations; and as does *The Eighth Promise* it introduces an ethnic sisterhood—in this case a community without men altogether: “These women don’t have to suffer childbirth or the responsibility of bringing up children... They look after no one except themselves... They earn their own rice, and they govern themselves” (1995: 363). All these texts incorporate beliefs and customs unfamiliar to mainstream and even Asian American readers.

The inclusion of culturally specific practices in these texts, which are all concerned with ethnic heritage and social justice, is integral to the affirmation of a marginalized culture. Shen grew up

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<sup>3</sup> All English translations of Shen’s text are mine.

in a terrain fraught with tension both between the Han immigrants and the Miao aborigines, and between the imperial soldiers and the local inhabitants. He recounts Manchu incursions in the chapter “A Lesson from the Xinhai Revolution (辛亥革命的一课)” when Manchu soldiers randomly slaughtered Miao villagers in the name of executing revolutionaries. After a few days of indiscriminate killings, the officials allowed the remaining captives to draw lots to determine who were to be executed. This chapter, which begins airily with excited teenagers (the author included) doing a literal *head* count of the dissevered pates, ends on a somber note: “I can never forget the desolate and plaintive expressions of those destined to die but unable to take their minds off their little ones at home. What I saw gave rise to my lifelong revulsion against the abuse of authority and power” (1988: 24).

The two Chinese American memoirs are equally concerned with ethnic and racial equality. The narrator of *The Woman Warrior* recalls how her boss at an art supply store took pride in coining the phrase “nigger yellow” to describe a paint color and ignored her objection to the offensive term. Another boss fired her for refusing to type invitations for a land developers’ association that was choosing to hold a company banquet in a restaurant being picketed by CORE and the NAACP. In *The Eighth Promise* Lee tells how he was suspended by his high school for protesting against the unfair treatment of the Chinese there. His parents decided to talk to the white principal:

But the principal got up from his desk, charged at Father, and started to scold him like a child, his fingers pointing in his face. Oh, he was big, this principal, but that was the wrong thing to do. Father, who was agitated but calm when we got there, jumped up from his chair, and with his own fingers jabbing back like in a swordfight, scolded him back. The principal retreated behind his desk. (2007: 171-172)

As a result of this dramatic confrontation with the principal, which provides a cathartic moment in the memoir, young Lee was permitted to resume his study.

McCunn shows Lue’s experience as a double exile during the second half of the nineteenth century when many Chinese laborers in California and Massachusetts were either driven out by white workers or actually lynched. Even Americans sympathetic to the Chinese considered them as heathens who must be “civilized” by being converted to Christianity. But, upon his return to China, Lue was harassed and persecuted by Chinese villagers on account of his conversion to Christianity. The immense pressure exerted on Lue by his white patrons in the United States to become Christian was matched only by the fanaticism with which his Chinese family attempted to exorcise the “Holy Ghost” from him.

All four texts deplore the invidious treatment of people on account of ethnic, racial, or religious differences. Hence I take exception to Chin’s insistence on autobiography being a Christian genre—as an extensive confession designed to gain acceptance by God or by the state. The autobiographical works analyzed show little evidence of Christian motivation or influence. Both Liang and Hu are known for their pragmatism. In the chapter “From Spirit Worship to

Atheism” Hu emphatically states that he had stopped “believing in ghosts and souls” from a young age (88). Shen is intent on disclosing the spiritual practices of the Miao minority, especially the practices of the shamans, and is not at all concerned with Christianity. Kingston and Lee are Buddhists. Lee mentions that William attended a Christian church during high school, but he soon left it in disgust on account of its racist sermons.

More importantly, Shen and the Chinese American authors are as subversive as Chin who, notwithstanding his antipathy toward *The Woman Warrior*, shares with its author a remarkably similar, if not identical, attitude about writing—as a form of martial arts. Throughout “This Is Not An Autobiography” Chin reiterates: “Writing is fighting. Life is War”; he claims Sun Tzu as his inspiration: “Sun Tzu’s thirteen chapters on the Art of War are a manual of style, a manual of ethics” (1985: 111,129). Kingston also associates words with swords. In *The Woman Warrior* she translates *baochou* (报仇)—the Chinese idiom for revenge—as “report a crime”: “The reporting is the vengeance—not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words” (1976: 53). If her English translation is judged according to how accurately it brings over the indigenous Chinese expression, it is admittedly a poor rendition. Yet this peculiar translation, which I consider to be an ingenious re-vision of the Chinese idiom, reinforces the pacifist author’s redefinition of heroism from physical prowess to verbal power. None of the (auto)biographers covered in this essay uses the genre to express personal feelings alone: they use the form to wage some kind of war—be it political, linguistic, ethnic, or racial.

### III

Trans-Pacific dialogues about autobiography enable us to gain a different perspective on some standing controversies concerning genre, content, and audience. Foremost in the debate, both in China and in the uproar around *The Woman Warrior*, is whether autobiography should admit fictional techniques and imaginative detail. Disciplinary and generic distinctions remain sharp in China. At an international biographical conference in Beijing (December 2010) one eminent Chinese scholar insisted on the sanctity of straightforward factual (auto)biography and considered a *literary* (auto)biography (传记文学) an adulteration. Another speaker decried the infiltration of Western thinking in Chinese autobiographical theory and writing. Yet back in 1902, Liang boldly announced: “all the literature is history” (quoted in Xu 2009: 17); he also reasoned the need to learn from the Western autobiographical tradition.

I too would like to defend the value of “literary autobiography,” which need not imply fabrication. Shen apparently only records firsthand events in his *Autobiography*, but uses his literary skills to have it read like a picaresque novel. The vignettes are quickened by authorial imagination and we are drawn by the disarming prose to its moral compass. The literary quality does not detract from its ethnographic and historical value; on the contrary, it enables Shen to adumbrate the Manchu regime’s repressive measures: random killing of Miao civilians in the name of crushing a rebellion and exterminating mavericks and potential dissidents in the name of purging a village. Although he is insinuating against a regime that has already been

overthrown, similar abuses by the ruling power persist. Had these circumstances been presented in a straightforward manner, and had the author's condemnation been stated openly, his writing most likely would have been censored even before 1949. Shen's way around the restrictions was to couch his political critique in quaint vignettes.

In the West, "literary autobiography" is often categorized as memoir, but the distinction between autobiography (supposedly factual) and memoir (which allows for poetic license) remains fuzzy. Intellectuals such as Hayden White and Jean-Francois Lyotard have cogently challenged the line between fiction and nonfiction, literature and history. Although Chin is not alone in insisting on telling the "fake" from the "real," and in denouncing *The Woman Warrior* for falsifying Chinese culture by conflating the stories of Yue Fei and Hua Mulan (1991), other critics extol the book as singularly creative. I believe as long as scholars are vigilant in differentiating original myths from inventive adaptations and in ferreting out the reasons why some authors wish to combine fact with fiction and objective observations with subjective impressions, and use what elsewhere I call "slanted allusions" (Cheung 2014), these personal accounts can convey deeper truths than putatively factual autobiography.

An author's reasoning may be literary, political, or both. In *The Woman Warrior*, the narrator has warned the reader from the outset that she cannot tell Chinese traditions from movies, nor her mother's stories from her dreams. This confusion, which she attributes in part to her Chinese American upbringing, gives the author the poetic license to mingle fact and fiction and to forge an empowering ad hoc Chinese American tradition. The section about Fa Mulan is not presented as a traditional Chinese story but as the narrator's *fantasy* of herself morphing into the legendary warrior: "I couldn't tell where the stories left off and the dreams began" (1976: 19). Superimposing the story of Yue Fei, a male general whose mother carves words on his back, on that of Mulan allows the author to redefine heroism by transferring power from "sword" to "word"—using the pen as weapon. As a writer and a feminist pacifist, Kingston has both literary and political stakes in imagining a woman warrior that defeats her enemy with words. Because the mainstream audience is unfamiliar with these well-known tales about Mulan and Yue Fei, however, many assume erroneously that the fantasy created by the narrator is the traditional story. But Kingston should not be held responsible for her readers' mistakes. John Milton got away with recasting Homeric gods as fallen angels in *Paradise Lost*; Christa Wolf with giving Achilles a different sexual orientation in *Cassandra*. Had Kingston's audience been as familiar with "The Ballad of Mulan" as they are with Homer, critics would have focused on her architectonics rather on cultural authenticity.

Another bone of contention over Chinese American writing is the use of alien or outlandish material (see Chin 1991; Ma 2000; Zhao 2007), and Shen's work again offers a helpful transpacific analogue. Many scholars from China as well as Asian Americanists balk at Chinese American writers' description of rare or antiquated Chinese customs such as the cutting of human flesh to express filial piety, as in Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club*, or the monkey feast in *The Woman Warrior*. Yet analogous sketches by Shen have not aroused similar discomfort in China.

The reason may lie in his avowal of “eccentric” behavior in his hometown. The author has informed the reader in the first chapter, “The Milieu of My Upbringing (我所生长的地方),” that his village is regarded by urban folks as a “weird place (古怪地方).” Implicitly he is asking mainstream Han readers to refrain from hasty judgment and to relish the unique character of his locale. Apropos of the episode about the tofu vendor, Shen’s intention is not to use the macabre detail for sensational purpose but to prompt readers to see the incident through the perpetrator’s eyes and to question the decapitation meted out by the Manchu officials. After all, the vendor has not committed any rape or murder, but he is executed for loving a young girl beyond the grave. His behavior would not seem so wacky or delinquent were we to think of Shakespeare’s Romeo who, as soon as he learns about Juliet’s death, resolves to “lie with” her that very night (5.1.34) and who has come down through literary history as one of the most romantic tragic heroes. Shen’s chapter exposes the ruthless practice of the Manchu soldiers who see it fit to dispatch any minority member (in this case a cave dweller) who deviates from the established urban norm. The nuanced ending of the chapter leaves little doubt as to where the author’s sympathy lies:

Vexed by the vendor’s unremorseful demeanor, a soldier yells at him: “Rabid dog, aren’t you afraid to die? I’m going to chop off your nutty head this very next minute!” The man only smiles softly and keeps quiet. His smile seems to register: “Who knows which one is nuts here.” This smile has not faded from my memory all these years; over a decade has passed and it is still remarkably vivid. (1988: 55)

Shen’s interpretation of the vendor’s expression subtly reverses the official conception of sanity and insanity and casts a dubious shadow over the bloody purge of civilians who fail to conform to the national self-image.<sup>4</sup>

Had Shen emigrated to the United States and published his *Autobiography* in English, Chinese American critics might have taken him to task for using lurid details to pander to the taste of Western audiences. In the early years of the People’s Republic of China, Shen was purged for being “peach-pink” (i.e. pornographic) and “uncommitted” to the New China, not for crowd-pleasing (Kinkley 1987: 266), whereas criticism regarding contemporary Chinese American writers’ use of “Orientalist” material stems from anxiety over white audience’s (mis)perceptions. As Katheryn M. Fong complains in an open letter to Kingston: “I read your references to mythical and feudal China as fiction.... The problem is that non-Chinese are reading your fiction as true accounts of Chinese and Chinese American history” (1977: 67). The Chinese readers in the Mainland are not troubled by Shen’s inclusion of shocking incidents because they are familiar with the mainstream Chinese culture, just as American readers are not vexed by regional writers’ display of local color, however eerie, as in Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily” (verily a Western “bedfellow” to Shen’s “What I Witness during Qingxiang,” in plot

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<sup>4</sup> This chapter reminds me of “The Legend of Miss Sasagawara” by Hisaye Yamamoto, an allegorical tale in which the narrator also reverses our notion of who is sane and who is mad at the end.

and in allegorical import). In other words, critical discomfort with Orientalist content has less to do with whether it is “authentic” than how it may come across to a mainstream American audience that assumes the work to be representative of the author’s ancestral culture or the immigrant community.

McCunn seems to have found a methodological solution to this quandary in *Wooden Fish Songs*. Her novel contains as many exotic details as does *The Woman Warrior*, but she deflects the Orientalist gaze by juxtaposing Chinese beliefs in assorted ghosts with Quaker beliefs in “Holy Ghost.” Unlike works that set “odd” Chinese traditions against the European American “norms,” McCunn tells by turns the strengths and the biases in Chinese, European American, and African American cultures. The importance of tuning in to voices from various quarters is exemplified by the three narrative viewpoints in *Wooden Fish Songs*, a work that espouses multiple ways of seeing, both structurally and thematically. Through its orchestration of the three perspectives, the novel shows how Lue’s life is ravaged by the anti-Christian hysteria in China and by the racist and anti-miscegenation laws in the United States—turning him into a pariah in both countries. Yet it is also on account of his ability to combine his hands-on knowledge of planting gleaned from his Chinese mother, the botanical instruction given by his white mother, and the folk wisdom passed on by an African American couple that he achieves national renown as a horticulturist with an orange named after him in Florida.

Bicultural or multicultural literacy, as epitomized by McCunn, is perhaps the most effective solution to the problems arising from American audience’s unfamiliarity with Chinese literature. Unpersuaded as I am by most of the pronouncements in “This Is Not An Autobiography,” there is one point made by Chin with which I cannot more fully agree. Chin considers himself a lone champion of the “Chinaman” tradition in the United States because of the lack of Chinese cultural literacy among Americans. He bemoans the fact that while he was fully conversant as an English major with the Western literary tradition, his Berkeley English teachers (and even fellow Chinese Americans) knew pathetically little about Asian classics. In his unminced words:

I am so fluent in your culture, people there declare me positively assimilated...Your language is mine down to the maggoty red raunch, for I know where it comes from. I went to school with your kids and know the lullabies you sang to them, the stories you told, the Aristotle, the Plato, the Homer, the Bible, the Shakespeare you wrap your language and literature in like fish in old newspapers.

But you don’t know our lullabies and heroic tales, the myth and drama that twangs and plucks our sense of individuality, our personal relations with the authorities and the state. You should know. (1985:118)

The asymmetry in cultural knowledge persists to this day. Most college students in China, Chinese majors included, have read Shakespeare and even the Bible, but few of their American peers have heard of *The Three Kingdoms*, *Water Margins*, or *Dream of the Red Chamber*. A

greater familiarity with the Eastern heritage among Americans is needed to attain or to assess the pluralistic vision foregrounded by the writers discussed in this essay.

Both writers and readers who tackle Chinese source material need to do the requisite preparation, and certainly not all tampering can be chalked up to artistry. There is a difference, for instance, between Milton's and Wolf's knowing and intentional reconfiguration of Homer, Kingston's open admission of cultural confusion as a pretext to engage in gender bending and artistic amalgamation, and glaring mis-telling of Chinese lore out of ignorance. Amy Tan, for instance, frequently "retells" traditional stories erroneously. To cite an example from *The Valley of Amazement* (2013), her latest novel, a celebrated fable by Tao Yuanming entitled "Peach Blossom Spring" (桃花源记)—a utopian tale about an egalitarian society without government—is retold by a Chinese courtesan as a story about "eternal youth" through sex: "If told in the right way, any man who hears it will wish to have your youth rub off on him. The actual rubbing, of course, will not happen until your defloration" (Tan 2013: 143). Since Tan's raconteur (unlike the narrator in *The Woman Warrior*) is born and raised in China, one can only attribute the inaccurate rendition of "the story everyone knows" (144) to the author's negligence or unabashed foisting of spurious erotica. (*The Valley of Amazement* is much more "peach-pink" than anything Shen has ever penned.) Lapses along the same vein abound as well in Tan's first two novels, *Joy Luck Club* and *Kitchen God's Wife*, as Wong has illustrated (Wong 1995). Hence a critic must also be knowledgeable about the source material in assessing literature that deploys Chinese material, whether irresponsibly, creatively, or subversively. Before one can judge whether Kingston's fusion of Mulan and Yue Fei is a distortion of Chinese legends or an innovative adaptation, one must have a firm grasp of the original sources. Increasing multicultural literacy, as Chin urged almost three decades ago, should be one of the goals of transnational American studies.

Chin is also right about the considerable Western impact on the evolution of Chinese and Chinese American autobiography. Hu was the first to acknowledge "the lack of biographical literature in China" and to admit he had urged friends to write their autobiographies in his preface to "An Autobiographical Account at Forty" (1992: 32). It was not till the twentieth century that the genre became a popular medium. As Li observes, "the impact of the West eventually led to even more daring innovation in autobiographical and biographical writing" (1992: 8). The increasing lack of inhibition about disclosing psychological struggle and family secrets in contemporary Chinese and Chinese American life writing can well be attributed to Western influence.

Personally I do not see this influence as a problem, or as an adulteration. Each work discussed in this essay stresses the heuristic importance of competing modes of viewing life and society. Both Liang and Hu argue for the need to learn from the West. Liang recounts his momentous first encounter with Kang Youwei, when this reformer made him see the urgent task of acquiring knowledge of Western history. Shen is adamant about preserving a record of the life of the Miao minority against the homogenizing influence of the Han mainstream. Kingston and



Lee draw on their maternal legacies to combat dominant American culture. Where Liang and Hu use autobiography to manifest the importance of Western knowledge, Kingston, Lee, and indeed Chin deploy (auto)biographical writing (or its parody in Chin's case) to reclaim their Chinese heritage. McCunn's novel cautions how an insistence on nativism can lead to narrow bigotry. It is therefore especially ironic and counterproductive for Chinese and stateside critics to denounce a genre that has been an amenable medium for crosscultural imaginings on account of its mixed origins. The point, surely, is not to eschew Western influence on Chinese literature but to reclaim and promulgate—as Chin has indeed attempted to do—a Chinese cultural legacy in America. This hybrid genre, as I have shown, has facilitated ethnic and feminist awakening, as well as cross-fertilization between worlds.

The alignment between the Chinese and Chinese American (auto) biographies may be traceable to cultural persistence in the diaspora. The melding of autobiography and biography, the emphasis on maternal legacies, and the contextualization of the self within familial, social, and political milieus all reflect interdependent self-formation and cultural expectations. The emphasis on female lineage—a telling deviation from Chinese patriarchal conventions—may be attributed to the autobiographical genre itself. If history tends to chronicle the exploits of men, the personal tenor of autobiography gives the authors leave to flout conventions and to recollect with honesty the person whose impact has been the strongest on their lives; that the individual happens to be the autobiographer's mother is then no more surprising than the tributes paid by Malcolm X, Alice Walker, James McBride, and Mo Yan to their mothers in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983), *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute To His White Mother* (1996), and “Nobel Lecture: Storytellers” (2012) respectively. The specific parallels between Shen's autobiography and the two Chinese American memoirs most likely stem from the authors' common status as ethnic minority members. All three writers give voice to the voiceless, reclaim a marginalized cultural identity, and root for ethnic or racial equality.

The disjunction between these Chinese and Chinese American works, on the other hand, attests to the dilution of ancestral culture across the Pacific. As Jen cautions, “culture is not fate; it only offers templates, which individuals can finally accept, reject, or modify, and do” (7). Writing from the opposite shore, the American authors no longer feel constrained by the disciplinary and generic boundaries—still being rather strictly observed in China—between history and fiction, autobiography and literary memoir, and fact and fantasy; nor by qualms about airing dirty linen in public. Unlike the Chinese authors who lavish compliments on their forebears, the Chinese American authors zero in on family secrets and disgraces, including insanity, adultery, and alleged homicide.

In addition to offering crosscultural comparisons, this study intervenes in three Asian American literary controversies concerning the deployment of autobiography, exoticism, and “fake” Chinese material. I posit that Kingston and Lee use their memoirs to contest rather than to conform to dominant culture. Through juxtaposing their works with Shen's autobiography, I

demonstrate that what is seen as potboiler excess in one context may be appreciated as local color in another, depending on the audience's cultural literacy. Taking cues from McCunn and Chin, I suggest two possible strategies to address critical concerns about "Orientalist" content: the decentering of cultural norms, as McCunn has done in *Wooden Fish Songs*; and the promulgation of Chinese cultural literacy, as espoused by Chin. But this literacy must go beyond the heroic tradition championed by Chin to include, among others, the Chinese autobiographical tradition that he claims to be nonexistent.

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