CHAPTER - IV
THE DREAMS OF FOUR GENERATIONS
(China Men)

China Men is a second collection of memoirs by Maxine Hong Kingston. Considered as a companion volume to The Woman Warrior, China Men celebrates the lives and accomplishments of Kingston’s father, uncles, grandfathers and great-grand fathers. Kingston portrays her ancestors as inspiring, heroic and memorable characters. She refuses to present them as victims of immigration and makes use of their ambitious and undaunted lives as appropriate introduction to the history of Chinese emigration to US. Though she had thought of naming the novel Gold Mountain Heroes, fearing the existing negative cultural stereotypes imposed on Chinese as obsessed workaholics, she renamed the novel as China Men. This is also perceived as the subversive strategy of Kingston, in contesting the pejorative meaning associated with immigrants from China. Kingston explained the reason in naming the novel in two separate words: “that’s the way Chinese language is… monosyllabic single words… (and) the Capital C and Capital M add dignity (Skenazy 111). The meaning of Chinese becomes an iconic introduction to analyze each of the six major chapters. The ideograph ‘Chinamen’ is applied to men and women alike, as Maxine is woman writer. It also functions as a symbolic representation of the recounting of the stories of immigrants.
The social and cultural situation of Asian Americans is incomprehensible, indecipherable and exotic like the ideograph that refuses to yield for any kind of interpretation. Kingston’s attempt to probe into the cultural history of her pioneering Asian American ancestors is only to lay claim to synthesis of Asian American identity.

Kingston was inspired by William Carlos Williams In the American Grain (1925), which is a series of meditations and exploration of American history and myths. Williams identifies the central aspects of American literary tradition and names them as the early texts of American history. He opens up the canon of American literature and creates a space for the inclusion of silent and submerged histories of United States. The origins of Non Anglo claims and their rights to participate in the construction of American history are contested in the history of Americans. Kingston begins the history of America with the entry of Chinese immigrants. In the very narratives of American nation, Kingston incorporates the courage, suffering and hard work of Chinese immigrants. She firmly opines that her fascination with William’s work has made her to revise the approaches to understand American history. Kingston is fascinated with Carlos Williams portrayal of Abraham Lincoln as a mother dent on nurturing the wounded country.
In *China Men*, she recounts the narrative that Williams has initiated. She conflates the tale of Mulan, a legendary woman fighter with the tale of Yue Fei, a general in the Chinese army, to produce her rendition of Fa Mu Lan story. She transforms the male traveler Tang Ao, into the caricature of high class courtesan. Liberating herself from the constraints of gender and ethnicity, Kingston reconstructs American history foregrounding the personal stories of male ancestors. Kingston incorporates two different worlds the old and the new representing China and America over a span of several generations. Through the portrayal of men in her family and through the depictions of individual emigrations of China and US, Kingston situates her own patrimony in two cultures. She weaves several narrative strands into the history of America and China and creates incontrovertible contribution to the patterns of historical and cultural events that shaped the contemporary history of America.

*China Men* is about six principal narratives and is an episodic adventure of men in Kingston’s family. Each distinctive narrative, briefs the fragments of history. All the major sections create a geographical territory stretching from imperial China to Stockton, California. The narration encompasses approximately one hundred years from Taiping Rebellion to Vietnam. The narration begins with two brief vignettes- ‘On Discover’, about Tang Ao’s transformation in the land of women and ‘On
fathers’, in which group children identifies someone else as their father. The first chapter ‘The Father from China’ is the story of BaBa, depicting his auspicious birth, education, emigration to Gold Mountain and the betrayal by his friends in New York. The following two chapters recount the adventures of great grandfather. It is about Bak Goong and his experiences on the Hawain’ain sugar cane plantations. The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains is about Ah Goong’s life as a worker on the section of the transcontinental railroad that cuts through the Sierra Nevada Mountains in California. In ‘The Making of More Americans’ Kingston introduces other male relatives who made the journey to the United States: honorary grandfathers, a cousin, Kau Goong, Uncle Bun. The books end with ‘The Brother of Vietnam’ which depicts the lives of California born sons who join the military and serve Vietnam. China Men belongs to Tom Hong and it begins with the description of early life in China. In addition to the stories of father and son, it presents the sections that focus on Kingston’s great grand fathers, grandfathers and uncles. The narration is interweaved and embellished with traditional tales, revisions of myth, fantasy and reconstructions of history. She traces the journey of immigrants from China in the 19th century to the evolution of Asian American community in the late 20th century US. In her reworking of the past, she employs several narrative strategies to imagine a new American history. Using the traditional Chinese texts, with the
construction of memory, she initiates an exploration into the central issues that underlie the narratives of *China Men*.

Kingston reconstructs personal and political history, distorting conventional narratives only to extract the truth from the experience of Asian immigration. Faced with the dearth of information, she teases out and recuperates the reality from the stories heard in childhood, from incomplete records and from literary texts. She experiments and discovers right words and appropriate voice to narrate her father’s story. In ‘The Father from China’, she tries to imagine and then recreate the life of her father in China and his emigration to The Gold Mountain. Giving a voice to her father’s life that influenced and inspired her childhood, she reconstructs BaBa’s journey to America as a paradigm of all Chinese journeys to the Gold Mountain. The short story with the Ghostmate underscores the dilemmas encountered by the immigrants.

Kingston employs the juxtaposition of reconstructed history with intertextual elements. Robert Scholes definition of ‘texts lurking inside another’ each of the six major chapters in *China Men* are paired with intertexts. They are assisted by short tales, myths, vignettes, reminiscences, new items and factual accounts. Lurking before and after the chapters, they reinforce cultural predicaments. Serving as ironic commentaries on the crucial narrative patterns, they have subverted the hierarchies of
power inherent in Kingston’s narrative pattern. The adventures of Bak Goong are recounted in ‘The Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains’. Bak Goong travels to the Sandalwood Mountains to work in the sugarcane fields and realizes that he is tricked by job recruiters who promised him higher wages. He survives the plantation policies and discovers different methods to vent his rage and frustration against the inexplicable conditions. This narration is paired with separate inter chapters that emphasize the trickster qualities of Bak Goong. The two inter texts are from Chinese and Polynesian mythologies. These tales expose the ways adopted by the western powers in silencing the immortality of history conferred on the lives of the people.

Kingston employs the revision of cultural texts in *China Men*. She recasts the narrative from the western literary tradition to Chinese talk story. She rewrites these texts into Asian American forms. She appropriates an episode “The Country of Women” from the early 19th century Chinese American novel *Flowers in the Mirror* by Li Ruzhen. The tale ends with Kingston’s note suggesting that some scholars locate the Land of Women on North American Continent. She relocates the site of emasculation to America, Kingston comments metaphorically on the feminization of her Chinese fathers and offers a critique of the subjugation of women by the ancient patriarchal Chinese culture. In
another tale “The Adventures of Lo Bun Sun”, she transforms Western literary staple into the Chinese idiom. It is obvious from these stories that Kingston inserts purely factual material into her narrative strategies. She also employs fantasy as a narrative strategy. She offers an ironic commentary on the conditions of immigrant experience. She finds stories from Chinese folk traditions, from Western literature and from standard historical accounts, parables for the cultural position of several generations of men who emigrated from China to the United States.

The theme of the novel is subjected to Gender criticism. Gender criticism considers the gender differences produced by the culture. The biological gender constructions are essentially artificial and vulnerable to alternation. As the categories of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ are not necessarily absolute in nature, ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ rupture the boundaries of separation. Though many people term ‘gender studies’ is synonymous with ‘Women Studies’ or ‘Feminist Criticism’, the discipline of ‘men’s Studies’ has developed since early 1970’s. It has become a vibrant and exciting interdisciplinary field of study. It has engaged the attention of male and female scholars and has included contemporary literary and cultural concerns. It examines the historical construction of masculinity and understands the historical, social, cultural, political, religious and economic contexts in the shaping and perpetuation of masculinity. A
concept that underlies men’s studies is that it considers masculinity as a social construction and a product of specific cultural environment.

Study of masculinity demands interdisciplinary investigation. Meticulous scholarly probe has to be made into the issues of male sexuality, male body, versions of masculinity, performance of masculinity, masculinity and power, masculinity and violence, stereotypical masculinity, the relationship between fathers and sons, fathers and daughters, homosexuality, transvestism and masculinity and globalization. In addition to the forays Masculine discipline has made, the emergence of Cultural Studies has created a wide readership among the academics. Susan Faludi’s *Stiffed* (1999) has examined cultural ramifications defined by masculinity.

Frank Chin is an important Asian American writer and critic who interrogated the construction of masculinity among Asian Americans and reversed the stereotypes imposed on Asian Americans. His first Asian American Play *Chickencoop China Man* (1972), and the Asian American Television script *Year of the Dragon* has created consciousness in contesting the damaging stereotypes of Asian American men. The masculine representations of Asian men by the west are servile (domestic) or sinister. These representations insinuate that Asian men are not American and they do not conform to the popular image of the
American male. Exposing the chicks Asian American representations, Chin privileges Guan Goong (Kuan Yu), the God of war as the symbol of Asian masculinity in his work. He has attempted to counteract feminine or sexless images that have represented Asian men in American popular culture. To prove that Chinese stance is militant like that of Black Panthers, Chin has embraced the outlaw tale *The Water Margin*. Emulating the lines of Frank Chin, Kingston expresses her concern in damaging the negative popular images of Asian Americans. She has contextualized her explorations within the larger pattern of female oppression which exhibits that the same men are complicit while they were at home in China. In *China Men* she ironically juxtaposes the grandfather’s patriarchal power in China with the lack of absence in the Gold Mountain.

To perceive the theme of *China Men* in the light of Studies in Masculinity, it opens with story of Tang Ao, who crosses the ocean in search of the Gold Mountain and finds instead, the land of Women. He is stocked with cosmetics and women’s clothing and is completely captured by women. He is filled with women’s robes, shackle his wrists and ankles with women’s ornaments. His body is subjected to the victimization that women generally endure in the process of ornamenting the body. He is allowed to eat only women’s food. He is fed with chrysanthemum tea,
Chicken Wings and Vinegar soup. Subjected to the dietary practices, and victimization of the body, Tang Ao’s has been altered to subscribe to the ideal of Feminine beauty. Enhancing his bodily position with cosmetics, he gets his eyebrows plucked, covers the face with white powder and reddens his lips and cheeks. With a complete transformed physical posture, he is taken to the Queen’s court and is assigned the role of serving maid. Kingston concludes the story by subverting the earlier version of the scholars that they have identified the North American Continent in 441 A.D. is nothing but the land of Women discovered during the reign of empress Wu in 694 A.D itself. This episode of Tang Ao is paralleled with the experience of Chinese Men who crossed the Pacific Ocean in search of Wealth in the Gold Mountain. She projects mythical land of women as North America and depicted that early Chinese immigrants underwent a process of womanization in their new country. This process is projected in their hard labour, physical exhaustion, service of the family which eventually leads to the recognition and success. These men have fulfilled the embodiment ideal representations of life. Their experiencing of the women’s lives stood for the celestial characterizations of women. The enforced silence, confinement to the domestic sphere, invisibility, lack of agency and control imposed on women by the eastern and western cultures stood for the subjugation of women. The admirable perseverance and heroism is
redefined in the light of the experiences of women. Kingston attributes these qualities to the early immigrant of Chinese Men redefining the heroism which is presumed as the product of physical or intellectual prowess. Contradicting the martial prowess of the families, Kingston creates a new heroism which is quiet and stoic found in the lives of early immigrants of China Men.

There are three dominant patterns of emasculation in *China Men*. At the first level, the Chinese immigrants are reduced to nonentities. They are treated as expendables or unimportant creatures like the despised girl babies in China. When legal fathers arrive in China, immigration doctors treat them as animals. But the elderly people, especially fathers in China are revered and are treated with great respect. Kingston depicts the dying of labourers while working on the railroad in *China Men*. Their deaths are unmarked and unclaimed. This unfair treatment of the workers is particularly found in all the places, wherever there is a presence of Chinese workers in America. Kingston says that Chinese workers were denied the opportunity of owning the land, real estate or doing a business. They were also disallowed to be hired by the state and local government even for standing as testimonies. At the second level, they are emasculated into sexual deprivation. The lives of hundreds of men are subjected to sexually isolation, due to the imposition of exclusionary
laws. In the absence of wives or women many young men sought the physical pleasure with prostitutes. Many China towns became notorious for brothels frequented by the Chinese sojourners and also the white men from surrounding places. Ah Goong in *China Men* is a character who follows and intrigues the imprisonment of women in the clutches of prostitution. The third kind of emasculation that Kingston explores is the denial of the presence of wives and children to Chinese fathers. This is depicted when the police shutdown the gambling house in Stockton, destroying Baba’s income. BaBa is reduced to engage physical labour to support his family.

It is pertinent to observe that the society of China Men is exclusively male construct. In the absence of women masculinity becomes a cultural construct and its role becomes superfluous. Bak Goong, Ah Goong, Kau Goong, Say Goong, Mad Sao in *China Men* despite playing the traditional masculine roles become income producers deprived of the social and cultural power. Ah Goong is an interesting exception as he returns to China to look after his four sons, despite the experiences in Gold Mountain. By recounting the stories of America’s forgotten history, Kingston creates a space for these pioneers in conventional American history. The male characters depicted in *China Men* by Kingston are the reincarnations of classical epic heroes. They are
transformed from the culture of American frontier and are placed as solitary individuals at the backdrop of Chinese masculine tradition, to withstand severe adversities in life. Kingston begins her exploration in defining the American man and acknowledges the possibility of multiple origins. The image of the new American man is foreshadowed by Ah Goong, the grandfather who wishes to have a daughter in contrast to the Chinese patriarchal culture. Unlike many sojourners and immigrant men, Ah Goong responds and connects himself to children. On the lines of Abraham Lincoln in William Carlos William’s book, the New American carries the ethnic, racial and feminine heritages.

The new American Man that Kingston makes envisions in China Men is playful and helps children in transforming dragonflies into toy airplanes. Subverting the patriarchal culture, he loves daughters. Allows girl children to play with masculine gambling paraphernalia. This aspect is exemplified in Ah Goong’s character. The New American is also a story teller like uncle Bun. He is not too masculine. He carries masculine and feminine nature. He refuses to be a hyper masculine fighter. He teaches underprivileged youth in the ghetto before he goes to Vietnam. Kingston outlines the character of new Asian American man as educated, patriotic, peace loving and open minded. China Men concludes with a
vision of New America encompassing the playful, peaceful, nurturing and mother man.

In Maxine Hong Kingston’s *China Men* discuss the dreams of four generations of Hong Kingston’s working class family from the mid-nineteenth century to the sixties of the twentieth century. Cheung explains the term “Chinamen” by saying that the connotations of “Chinamen” have changed over time. She quotes from Kingston (1978) that “the term distinguished China Men from the Chinese who remained citizens of China, and also showed that they were not recognized as Americans” (Cheung, *Articulate Silence* 101). Later, in a television interview with Bill Moyers in 1990, Kingston said that “she separates the term into two words - China Men - to replicate the quality in the Cantonese language and to differentiate her term from the traditional slur”.

In *China Men*, according to Cheung, Kingston “reconstructs not only a family saga but also a Chinese American epic … one that gives voice to the many China Men whose presence was for decades unacknowledged in American history” (102). Also, as Julia Lisella states, *China Men* is “a book about work and class.” Lisella means that “the story told in *China Men* requires Kingston to confront issues of race and class oppression, in relation to cultural constructions of masculinity”
(Lisella 55, 60). It covers a history of over one hundred years. The lives of both the two grandfathers and father as single husbands in the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; the father as a married man, his wife as a dutiful wife-mother, the daughter-narrator and her brother as mediators of cultures since the forties of the twentieth century.

Kingston’s examines the dreams of Great Grandfather in the Hawaiian “Sandalwood Mountains” and dreams of Grandfather building the transcontinental railroad in the American West to illustrate how grandfathers raise their voice against racial cruelty and economic exploitation. In the chapter, “China Men: Claiming America,” Elaine Kim states that China Men is about “the Chinese American experience through family history combined with talk story, memory, legend and imaginative projection” (208). The text is composed of six biographical chapters about four generations of China Men: Great Grandfathers, Grandfathers, The Father from China, The American Father, The Making of More Americans, and The Brother in Vietnam. In between these chapters, there are shorter chapters from one page to about ten pages long which tell either mythic stories or historical events. They are like the layers of sandwiches which make Kingston’s writing colorful. They serve to contextualize or symbolize biographical happenings.
King-kok Cheung in *Articulate Silences* (1993) thinks that these two short sections “furnish intertextual responses to the chapter on Bak Goong, ‘The Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains,’” who broke the silence imposed upon him by his white bosses (Cheung110). Bak Goong went to the Hawaiian Sandalwood Mountains with beautiful dreams. The agent that recruited him made beautiful promises: “‘we are offering free passage, free food, free clothing, and housing.’ ‘Three years from today, home with riches’” (*China Men* 92). Although Bak Goong did not know the concept of the American Dream, the idea of making money was attractive to him. Of the Night. Maui entered Hina’s body through her vagina and took her heart in his arms. He had started tunneling out feet first when a bird laughed at the sight of his legs wiggling out of the vagina. Hina awoke and shut her vagina, and Maui died (*China Men* 122). Again, there was no immortality for the human race for breaking the silence required. Impressed, Bak Goong signed a three-year contract, dreaming to get rich quickly and return to his home village in three years. Three years of work as a farm worker was a long time during which Bak Goong endured bodily injuries not only from the backbreaking work but also from the white bosses’ whips. Kingston describes the difficult labor of hacking a farm out of the wilderness since there was no ready sugarcane farm to tend. To level the wilderness from the ocean to the mountain:
Bak Goong was given a machete, a saw, and a pickax. The green that had looked grass at a distance was a tangle of trees so thick that they shut out sunlight. Bak Goong chopped into the edge of this strange forest. He could not hold the branches because of the thorns on them. (98)

The plantation had a rule that the farm workers were not allowed to talk at work. This was too much for Bak Goong because he “needed to cast his voice out to catch ideas” (100). He broke the silence by talking and was whipped. Also, “Bak Goong had been fined for talking. And sick men had been docked for every day they had been lying lazy in bed. Those who had not recovered from crossing the ocean got an accounting to how much they owed for food and lodging plus passage. The strong workers had money subtracted for broken tools” (102). Fined for various reasons, China Men were cheated by the promise of riches. To expose such exploitive history, Kingston uses the motif of silence. Breaking the silence imposed upon them, the Great Grandfathers were resisting racial domination and capitalist exploitation.

Kingston depicts Bak Goong as a “talk addict” (110). Having been fined for talking, Bak Goong resorted to singing and coughing. The white boss did not seem to mind the first day he sang so that he thought that he had resolved talking. He boasted to his fellow men, “If that demon whips
me, I’ll catch the whip and yank him off his horse, crack his head like a coconut” (101). As he was singing these ideas, however, there was a crack next to his ear and he found a cut on his shoulder. Whipped for singing, Bak Goong resorted to coughing. When the demons howled to work faster, he coughed in reply: “you – dead – white - demon. Don’t - stare - at me - with – those – glass - eyes. I can’t – take – this - life” (104).

Because of the heavy work and ill treatment, one third of the workmen were sick. Bak Goong diagnosed their illness as “congestion from not talking” and advised them to “talk and talk” (115). To organize the workmen to talk, Bak Goong told the story of Ancient King Midas in Greek Mythology. The King is popularly remembered for his ability to turn everything he touched into gold: the Midas touch. Kingston, however, claims that she is telling a Chinese story. The King wished to have a son for years. When he finally had a son, the son had cat ears. The King kept this a secret until he could hold it no longer. One day, he dug a hole in the ground and shouted his secret into it: “The King’s son has cat ears.” Satisfied after letting out his secret, he pushed the dirt back into the hole and stamped it down. The next spring, however, the buried words spread throughout the land and people could hear: “The King’s son has cat ears”. (117)
Inspired by the King’s story, the farm workers dug a hole in the ground on the following day to start their sounds of battle against the rule of silence. They told the earth their secrets of how much they missed home: “‘I want home,’ Bak Goong yelled, pressed against the soil, and smelling the earth. ‘I want my home,’ the men yelled together. ‘I want home. Home. Home. Home. Home’” (117). They made such a noise that their white bosses, not knowing what they were up to, did not come charging upon them. The shout party was a victory. From the day of the shout party, “Bak Goong talked and sang at his work and did not get sent to the punishment fields” (118). Breaking the silence imposed upon him, Bak Goong found his voice by singing, coughing, and organizing a shout party. After the shout party, Bak Goong told his workmen: “We can make up customs because we’re the founding ancestors of this place” (*China Men* 118). Claiming America, Bak Goong demanded being treated equally by the dominant culture. Kingston ends Bak Goong’s story with the following words: “the new green shoots would rise, and when in two years the cane grew gold tassels, what stories the wind would tell” (118). It was not two years but generations passed before a great-granddaughter came to the Sandalwood Mountains seeking her ancestral voices: “I have heard the land sing. I have seen the bright blue streaks of spirits whisking through the air” (90). Listening to the voice of her ancestors, Kingston imagines their life and tells stories about them. With her remarkable
story-telling technique, Kingston portrays the forefathers as resistant to the rule of silence. According to Frank Chin, one measure of the success of white racism is the silence of the minority race and the amount of white energy necessary to maintain or increase that silence (Cheung, *Articulate Silences* 7). In the case of Bak Goong and his fellow workmen, silence had been forced upon them by white authority in punishments of all kinds, thus serving as a form of racial domination. Speaking out, they not only expressed their angry feelings, but also resisted being exploited as cheap racial laborers.

Silence is an important topic in the discussion of Asian American literature and other literatures. In mainstream feminist perspectives, however, silence is solely attributed to patriarchal construction of womanhood. Cheung, however, addresses the silencing of Chinese American men. She comments that Kingston is skeptical about “the representation of her male ancestors, and she deploys polyphony against male and white authority together” (*Articulate Silence* 102). Cheung indicates several ways in which silence is imposed: silence “can be imposed by the family in an attempt to maintain dignity or secrecy, by the community in adherence to cultural etiquette, or by the dominant culture in an effort to prevent any voicing of minority experiences” (3). Bak Goong and his fellow workmen broke the silence in the sense of
resistance to the dominant culture’s effort to prevent them from voicing their experiences. Having them speak out with “the skills of deceit” such as singing, coughing, and organizing a shout party, Kingston portrays them as resourceful people, rather than being silent, docile, and inferior with feeble mental abilities. Raising their voices, Bak Goong and his workmen claimed that they were the founding fathers of America.

Kate Liu says that “the multiple texts are related to each other thematically” (2). The two short chapters, “The Laws” and “Alaska China Men,” include historical facts that furnish the intertextual responses to the chapter about Ah Goong, “The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains,” who contributed to the building of the transcontinental railroad but was subjected to Driving Out after the railroad was completed.

Shirley Sui Ling Tam indicates that large scale employment of Chinese in the building of the Central Pacific Railroad beginning in 1865 played the greatest role in the shift from independent gold mining to toilsome wage labor (125). Kingston reflects such history in China Men by telling the story of the railroad workers. Grandfather, Ah Goong, was one of those railroad men who labored dangerously and heroically in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The Central Pacific “hired him on sight; china men had a natural talent for explosions. Also, there were not enough
working men to do all the labor of building a new country” (China Men 128). Like Bak Goong, Ah Goong and his fellow railroad workers dreamed their Gold Mountain dreams. For them, America was a land of wealth and opportunity. The Gold Mountain, as Cheng Lok Chua indicates, “Succinctly suggests the dream of the first Chinese who came to America in the pursuit of frankly materialist goals - to get rich quickly and retire to their native villages” (34). The idea of getting rich attracted Ah Goong just as it had attracted Bak Goong a few years earlier. Instead of getting rich quickly, unfortunately, Ah Goong ended up working as a railroad construction worker for years. Sucheng Chan describes the most dangerous part of building the railroad:

The first true test the Chinese faced was a huge rock outcrop called Cape Horn, around which no detour was possible. To carve a ledge on the rim of this granite bulk, Chinese were lowered by rope in wicker baskets from the top of cliffs. While thus dangled, they chiseled holes in the granite into which they stuffed black powder. Fellow workers pulled them up as the powder exploded. Those who did not make it died in the explosions. (31)

In China Men, Ah Goong was doing this dangerous job. Because he was thin and light, Ah Goong was among those who were to be lowered down
from the top of the cliff in a wicker basket to where they had to insert gunpowder and fuses. He had to strike match after match, and when at last his fuse caught, he waved, and the men above pulled hand over hand, hauling him up, pulleys creaking. It was the most dangerous job setting charges, and each time, some basket men died from explosions. Some simply fell off the basket into the valley. The work became more dangerous when they had to use dynamite through the granite, and more people died. The railroads lost track of how many people died. According to Iris Chang, on average, “for each two miles of track laid, countless workers perished in accidental blasts. Eventually, more than one thousand Chinese railroad workers died, and twenty thousands pounds of bones were shipped back to China”. (63-64)

Doing the toughest and most dangerous work under tough natural conditions, they were not treated well. Instead, they endured whippings from their overseers like slaves. Also, to make them work faster, the white bosses invented various games: “China Men against Welshmen, China Men against Irishmen, China Men against Injuns and black demons. The fastest races were China Men against China Men, who bet on their own teams” (China Men 139). China Men were deceived in other ways. Ah Goong, for example, was cheated by a demon in a white suit. Calling himself Citizenship Judge, the man said, “I Citizenship Judge
invites you to be U.S. Citizen. Only one bag of gold.’ ‘You vote,’ ‘You talk in court, buy land, no more china man tax.’” Excited, “Ah Goong bought it citizenship papers with one bag of gold” and “hid them on his person so that it would protect him from arrest and lynching” (142). The citizenship papers were fake, as it turned out years later, when BaBa was interrogated at the immigrant office and informed that “There are no such things as Citizenship Judges”. (59)

Chang explains that “the Chinese worked longer and harder than whites, but received less pay: because the Chinese had to pay for their own board, their wages were two-thirds those of white workers and a fourth those of the white foremen” (61). Paying China Men less, however, the management wanted them to work more. They promised a four-dollar raise per month if they agreed on a ten-hour shift inside the tunnels. The workmen could not take it: “‘a human body can’t work like that.’ ‘The demons don’t believe this is a human body’” (China Men 141). To bargain, China Men sent a delegation of English speakers and demanded forty dollars a month on an eight-hour shift, but their demands were turned down. The workmen, therefore, decided to go on strike, demanding equal treatment with the white workers. Ah Goong and his fellow workmen practiced their strike slogan: “Eight hours a day good for white man, all the same good for China Man”. (141)
Kingston documents that the strike began on June 25, 1867 and lasted nine days. Different from strikes in other literatures, China Men went on strike in their special way. As was their way in a strange land, they conducted their strike politely, appointing their headmen to present a list of demands that included more pay and fewer hours in the tunnels (Iris Chang 62). Kingston recounts the polite strike: while their English-speaking China Men went to the demons’ headquarters repeating their demands, the workmen simply walked off the job and relaxed. Some were sleeping; some were bathing in streams; some were gambling at their cards and tiles; some were playing their musical instruments; some were beating their drums at the punch lines of jokes; some were singing Peking operas; some were making up verses and laughing at their rhymes; some were telling stories; some went fishing and hunting; and some were sifting for gold (141). Instead of resorting to violence, China Men went on strike quietly. Crocker, the contractor of the Central Pacific, marveled at the orderliness of the strike: “If there had been that number of whites in a strike, there would have been murder and drunkenness and disorder. . . But with the Chinese it was just like Sunday. These men stayed in their camps. They would come out and walk around, but not a word was said; nothing was done”.
The Chinese railroad workers organized a strike involving two thousand men and that the strike was forced to stop after a week because the management stopped payments to the Chinese and cut off their food supply by Crocker, the director of the railroad, effectively starving them back to work. But Kingston rewrites such history by having China Men achieve a compromise victory after a nine-day strike: they got the eight-hour shift in the tunnels with a four dollar raise, not the fourteen dollars they had asked for (China Men 144). The strike, though quiet, according to Ronald Takaki, proves the structured resistance of the railroad workers and effectively “demonstrated group solidarity and organized resistance to economic discrimination and exploitation.” The strike “could enable men and women of various nationalities to gain a deeper understanding of themselves as laborers, to develop a working-class identity and consciousness”. (150)

After years of hard work, danger and deaths, the railroad was completed in 1869 and China Men cheered with the white men. However, when the American officials acclaimed the “Greatest Feat of the Nineteenth Century,” “The Greatest Feat in the History of Mankind,” declaring only Americans could have done it (China Men 145), they did not have China Men in mind. Instead, “the Central Pacific Railroad who cheated the Chinese railway workers of everything they could, tried to
write the Chinese out of history altogether” (Iris Chang 63-64). Like great grandfathers in Hawaii’s Sandalwood Mountains whose history was repressed, the Chinese railroad men “are not recorded by the white historians who are deaf to their contributions” (Cheung, *Articulate Silence* 110). Kingston, therefore, claims China Men’s contribution to building the transcontinental railroad:

They built railroads in every part of the country— the Alabama and Chattanooga Railroad, the Houston and Texas Railroad, the Southern Pacific, the railroads in Louisiana and Boston, the Pacific Northwest, and Alaska. After the Civil War, China Men banded the nation North and South, East and West, with crisscrossing steel. They were the binding and building ancestors of this place. (*China Men* 146)

Kingston declares that even if Ah Goong had not spent half his gold on Citizenship Papers, he was an American for having built the railroad (145). She claims China Men’s right to stay by asserting their contribution to building America. In Chinese American history, however, as Lisa Lowe states in her “Immigration, Citizenship, Racialization,” the American citizen has been defined against the Asian immigrant, legally, economically, and culturally, although they are a necessary racialized labor force within the domestic national economy (4). Lowe points out:
Orientalist racializations of Asians as physically and intellectually different from ‘whites’ predominated especially in periods in which a domestic crisis of capital was coupled with nativist anti-Asian backlash, intersecting significantly with immigration exclusion acts and laws against naturalization of Asians in 1882, 1924, and 1934. (5)

These racializations “cast Asian immigrants as the contradictory, confusing unintelligible elements to be marginalized and returned to their alien origins” (4). Chinese men, as the biggest Asian immigrant group, were the first targeted group affected by exclusionary laws despite their contributions to America. A most terrible effect of exclusionary and naturalization laws is the racial violence against Chinese immigrants in the period known as the Driving Out.

Kingston describes the cruel racial happenings in the grandfather chapter. As a jobless and homeless wanderer, Ah Goong observed: “In China bandits did not normally kill people, the booty was the main thing, but here the demons killed for fun and hate” (China Men 146). Ah Goong “slid down mountains, leapt across valleys and streams, crossed plains, hid sometimes with companions and often alone, and eluded bandits” during the Driving Out of Tacoma, Seattle, Oregon City, Alb­ania, and Marysville (146, 148). He survived by escaping, hiding, and disappearing
from the sites of violence, looking not at all scared. Instead, wherever he
escaped to, he enjoyed himself with diversions.

Such a portrayal of Ah Goong is interesting. By appealing to
strategies of survival rather than direct confrontation with violence, he
survived the hard times. This is a different kind of heroism from the
traditional model of manhood, in which only such masculine values as
competitive individualism and martial valor, personal integrity and honor,
and the ethic of private revenge are valued. Kingston challenges
traditional masculinity by reinventing a heroic tradition of her own. Bak
Goong’s heroism lies in his “skills of deceit” with which he broke the
silence imposed upon him. Ah Goong’s heroism lies in his courage to set
charges in a wicker basket and in his skills to hide, to disappear, and to
survive the dangerous Driving Out.

Kingston retells the story of *Robinson Crusoe* of Daniel Defoe in
the chapter “The Adventures of Lo Bun Son”. Kingston literally
translates Robinson’s name into Cantonese which sounds like *Lo Bun
Son*. In Chinese culture, names carry meanings. Kingston explains the
name:

*Lo* is “toil,” … *Lo* means “naked,” man “naked animal,” and
*Lo* also sounds like the word for “mule,” a toiling sexless
animal. *Bun* is the uncle who went to China to work on a
commune. And *Sun* is like “body” and also “son” in English and “grandson” in Chinese. *Lo Bun Sun* was a mule and toiling man, naked and toiling body, alone, son and grandson, himself all the generations. (226)

The name *Lo Bun Son* gives a striking image of Chinese immigrants working like toiling, sexless animals. In the chapter, “On Fathers,” Kinston describes the fact that the children frequently took other men for their father and called them BaBa. On one occasion, MaMa remarked: “He did look like Baba, though, didn’t he? From the back, almost exactly” (7). Such remarks imply that China Men have the same immigration backgrounds. That BaBa is indistinguishable from other men to the children is pitiful: BaBa was too busy to spend time with his family.

In the chapter, “The Father from China,” Kingston tells the story of BaBa before he emigrated to America. He took the last Emperor Examination at the age of fourteen. Having failed to become a government official, he became a village teacher, instead. But he was not happy with his teaching job. He joined the adults in their discussion about the Gold Mountain and dreamed about his future in America. Although his mother thought he was too young for emigration, his wife encouraged
Kingston imagined his entry in a number of different ways: illegal entry in a crate on a ship and legal entry by way of Cuba, Angel Island or Ellis Island as a “paper son.” “Paper son” entry was a popular practice at the time when families purchased citizenship papers for young boys from earlier sojourners. After BaBa set foot on the new land, he could no longer work as a scholar. Instead, he did lowly jobs such as washing windows on Fifth Avenue: “I washed all these windows,” he told his wife when she joined him fifteen years later. He explained that “When I first came here, I borrowed a squeegee and rags and a bucket, and walked up and down this street. I went inside each store and asked if they wanted the windows washed” (70). In that way, BaBa had made the money to pool for starting the laundry. The laundry men worked late into the night with no holidays. BaBa did the bookkeeping and practiced his calligraphy when others were asleep. Sometimes, he spoke the verses of “The Laundry Song”:

Years pass and I let drop but one homesick tear.
A laundry lamp burns at midnight.
The laundry business is low, you say,
Washing out blood that stinks like brass—
Only a Chinaman can debase himself so.

But who else wants to do it? Do you want it? (63)

Before he left for America, Baba had not dreamed of a life like this. He had said that “I have a diploma,” believing that “all you have to do is stay alert; play a little less than they do, use your memory, and you’ll become a millionaire” (45, 51). The villagers, however, thought otherwise: “Just because he’s skinny and too weak for physical labor, he thinks the white demon will say he’s obviously a scholar. But they can’t tell a teacher’s body from a laborer’s body” (45). The villagers were right. Transformed from a Chinese “poet-scholar” to a laundry man in America, BaBa was bullied by people of all colors. He was cheated by gypsies, harassed by the police and driven out of business by his business partners. It must have hurt him more than ever when he found that his own fellow countrymen had “ganged up on him and swindled him out of his share of the laundry” (73). They showed him the license - “registered with the demon courts” without his name. They were not appreciative of the fact that he was doing the bookkeeping for them late into the night and that his wife was doing the cooking and cleaning for them. The only excuse they gave was that he was always reading when they were working. It did not help when he claimed that “We had a spoken partnership. We shook hands. We gave one another our word” (73). There was nothing else he
could do but leave the laundrymen. His first Gold Mountain dream of owning part of the laundry business turned nightmarish.

Kingston depicts the story of BaBa managing a gambling house, which belonged to the most powerful Chinese American in Stockton, California. The owner of the casino, a fellow ex-villager, paid his and his wife’s travel fares. To repay him, both husband and wife worked for them - BaBa at the casino and MaMa as their house servant. The years of working at the gambling house were dismal: “He worked twelve hours a day, no holidays,” MaMa said. “Even on New Year’s, no day off. He couldn’t come home until two in the morning” (244). Even so, he could not make a comfortable home. Kingston describes their life:

We ate rice and salted fish, which is what peasants in China eat. Everything was nice except what MaMa was saying, “We’ve turned into slaves. We’re the slaves of these villagers who were nothing when they were in China. I’ve turned into the servant of a woman who can’t read. (245) And they lived in a shabby household:

In addition to a table and crates, we had for furniture an ironing board and an army cot, which MaMa unfolded next to the gas stove in the wintertime. … When Baba came
home, he and MaMa got into the cot and pretended they were refugees under a blanket tent. (246)

The family lived in such poverty. To improve his family life, BaBa worked hard to save for a house. When he saved enough money, he asked the owner of the gambling house to negotiate a cash sale because he did not know much English. But twice the casino owner bought the house for himself, explaining that BaBa could rent from him: “It’ll save you money, especially since you’re saving to go back to China. You’re going back to China anyway” (245), the owner said to him.

The gambling house BaBa managed in his name was illegal, which means he would take the blame for the real owner if found out by the police. During World War II, the police raided the gambling house. Luckily, BaBa was not jailed or deported, but neither he nor the owner worked in gambling again. The loss of the gambling house, according to Julia Lissella, shows that “the second generation, Kingston’s father’s generation, is caught up more tightly in the bureaucracy of immigration, in the strange customs of the immigration officials” (65). Referring to this loss, Wendy Ho remarks, BaBa’s “failure to achieve the ‘American Dream’ records the brutalizing psychosocial, economic, and political subordination and exploitation practiced in this country against Chinese Americans” (203). BaBa’s disillusionment with the American Dream
seems to have shrunk his mental horizon. Subdued, he fell into a serious depression and lost “not only his voice but also his humor” (Cheung, *Articulate Silences* 113). For a long time, BaBa was disheartened: “He was always home. He sat in his chair and stared, or he sat on the floor and stared. He stopped showing the boys the few *kung fu* moves he knew” and “screamed wordless male screams that jolted the house upright and staring into the night” (*China Men* 13). He “screamed in his sleep,” too (251). Unable to return to China like his forefathers for various reasons, BaBa was here to stay, and staying, as it turned out, “entails a brutal self-transformation” (Cheung 113). It took BaBa several months to figure things out after which he cheered up. He got out of his chair and returned home with news of purchasing a laundry which one of his friends happened to sell. Like the grandfathers who heroically survived difficult times, the Chinese father was “heroic, too, in his ambitions for himself and for his family” (Ho 202). The opening of his laundry demonstrates the heroism of BaBa in the struggle against business failures to achieve the American Dream.

As BaBa stayed with his family in America, his American Dream changed unlike his forefathers whose dream was to make money quickly and return to their home country, BaBa and other immigrants dreamed to become “owners of small businesses” because self-employment offered
one method of economic advancement. Chinese immigrants at that time could only find jobs in segregated labor markets where they earned the lowest wages. Owning a business, therefore, was a means and strategy for survival, a way to control their own labor, and “a response to racial discrimination and exclusion in the labor market”. It was, however, no easy job owning a business under the economic regime of capitalism. In the first place, Chinese immigrants were not only denied citizenship, but also ownership of property. The threat to the Chinese community, in the second place, was not wholly external, or entirely the result of the dominant culture’s social, political, economic, and legal racism. Some of the responsibility fell on the Chinese American community itself. Father’s first partnership with his fellow laundrymen was established on a “spoken partnership” and his second on a false ownership, i.e. he owned the laundry in the name of a casino owner who did not legally own the business. Despite all these failures, BaBa eventually succeeded in owning his laundry, which demonstrates the heroism of China Men against adverse racial and economic conditions.

Kingston is sympathetic with the mortification of Chinese men in the new world, but she is also angry with the sexism they exercised at home as a result of the double bind of patriarchal values. To counter patriarchy, Kingston portrays MaMa as strong and powerful in her
struggle against racism in America and sexism in China and Chinese America. She worked hard to help support the family in what she called the “terrible ghost country where a human being works her life away” (*The Woman Warrior* 104). First of all, she had to adjust to her fall in social status. In China, she was a village doctor, enjoying respect and privilege from the villagers. After she joined her husband in America, she could no longer use her medical degree and skills. The first day she set foot in New York, she started to work, helping her husband and his fellow laundrymen cook, wash, and clean the house. When they started a family in Stockton, California, MaMa took full responsibility for looking after the family of six children. And when her husband was out of a job, she took the role of a bread winner, doing manual labor in the fields and canneries. Bonnie Khaw-Posthuma remarks that MaMa:

> demonstrates the complex roles of many early twentieth century Chinese American females: they assumed the dual responsibilities of husband and wife as they both preserved family unity and Chinese cultural values within the home and worked outside the home to earn money for their family’s survival. (267)

Cheung argues that “*China Men* is devoted almost exclusively to historical and communal portraits of men, yet the feminist in Kingston is
not mute” (100). While telling men’s stories, Kingston expresses how femininity is imposed on the racial “other” by drawing connections between sexual and racial subjugation. The Tang Ao legend about gender reversal, for example, is “double edged, pointing not only to the mortification of Chinese men in the new world, but also to the subjugation of women both in old China and in America” (240). Like Tang Ao, who was transformed from a man in China into a woman in North America, China Men were emasculated, doing feminine jobs under American “Patriarchy.” Put into women’s shoes, China Men should have been sympathetic with the subjugated position of women in their patriarchal culture. This was, however, not often the case. Instead, having been forced into “feminine” subject positions, China Men tended to “seek to reassert their patriarchal power by denigrating a group they perceive as weaker than themselves: Chinese American women” (Goellnicht, “Tang Ao in America” 2000). Women from China, therefore, had to cope with sexism at home in the racist American society.

Working hard had meaning for Chinese American women because “it enabled them to fulfill their filial obligations as well as provide a better future for their children”. Understanding such obligations, MaMa tried her best to keep her family together as a wife and mother. She understood her husband’s pain and anger when he lost his casino
business. When he “screamed wordless male screams that jolted the house upright,” she would move from bed to bed, soothing her children: “That was just BaBa having a bad dream. Bad dreams mean good luck” (*China Men* 13, 14). Yet, she had to goad her husband into resuming his role as the bread winner:

You Poet. You scholar. What’s the use of a poet and a scholar on the Gold Mountain? You’re so skinny. You’re not supposed to be so skinny in this country. You have to be tough. You lost New York laundry. You lost the house with the upstairs. You lost the house with the back porch. (248)

MaMa explained to her children that “it’s a wife’s job to scold her husband into working” (247). Meanwhile, she took good care of her husband, cooking food and preparing Chinese medicine to heal him. Eventually, she succeeded in helping him start his new laundry business. Coping with her husband’s sexist behavior skillfully in the face of racial subjugation at the intersection of both Chinese and American patriarchal cultures, MaMa became the preserver of family values, putting family interest over her individual freedom and happiness, thereby protecting her husband and their six children successfully. Ho comments that MaMa “exercises a level of agency and power as a mother and wife, but she carries the heavy burdens of her family’s survival as well” (203). Holding
half the family sky, MaMa did an equally good job in supporting the family.

In portraying MaMa as a laboring wife and mother, Kingston presents her class theme very well. Transformed from an educated woman in old China to a cheap laborer in America, MaMa bemoaned that “We’re the slaves of these villagers who were nothing when they were in China. I’ve turned into the servant of a woman who can’t read” (China Men 245). Once in a long while, MaMa “brings out the metal tube that holds her medical diploma” (The Woman Warrior 57). It must have been painful for her to think of her fall in social status when she performed the double duties in and outside the home, contending with both the prevailing ideology of Chinese American males at home and the racism of the larger American society.

The portrayal of MaMa possessing both female and male powers is reflective of Postcolonial feminism in that female identity is constructed in her interaction with the globe rather than predetermined. In this regard, “Spivak and many other postcolonial and feminist critics alter us to the ways in which a subject position is constructed within discourse, rather than pre-existing discourse” (Bahri 207). True, Third World women often find their multiple identities in their interaction with the international world. In this interaction, according to Judith Butler, “identity is
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performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (25). Butler means that gender is a performance. As a result, the binary view of gender relations, i.e. the two clear-cut groups of men and women no longer accounts for what is happening to women today. Kingston’s portrayal of MaMa possessing both male and female powers is expressive of such poststructural feminist ideas.

True, MaMa performed different duties in different social contexts. While she was a privileged village doctor in China with a servant girl helping her, she became the servant of those who could not read in America. And, while she was defiant of the Chinese tradition by refusing to kowtow to her husband at her wedding in China, she coped with her husband’s sexist abuses in America when he lost his business. She was an understanding, tolerant, and caring wife. The way she dealt with her suffering from sexism proves that she was resourceful enough to understand and cope with the tough social/racial reality. Her gender role was, thus, determined by the social circumstances in which she had to demonstrate both her female power as a caring wife-mother, and male power as a physical laborer and bread winner, which means she performed double roles as she suffered doubly. Portraying MaMa as understanding and hardworking against adverse social conditions, Kingston challenges the Oriental stereotypes of Chinese women being
docile and obedient slaves to their husbands. At the same time, she opposes the division between men and women by bridging gender differences, suggesting that women are not at all a group “characterized by common dependencies or powerlessness”.

Kingston empowers China Men’s masculinity with male potency. That is, she portrays them with strong sexual desires. Bak Goong linked the rule of silence to the silence of the Buddhist monk, which he then linked to the lack of sexual possibilities: “Apparently we’ve taken a vow of chastity too. Nothing but roosters in this flock” (China Men 100). As was mentioned earlier in the chapter, Bak Goong organized a shout party: they dug a hole in the ground and told the earth their secrets: “Hello down there in China!” “Hello, Mother. Hello, my heart and my liver” (117). My “heart and liver” is the Chinese way of saying “my sweetheart.” The shout party, on the surface, tells how much they missed their families. In a deeper sense, as Cheung comments, this “oral penetration - he literally pounds away at the earth” is depicted as “an act of survival and potent imagination, the coupling of genital imagery and the rhetoric of conquest”. (109)

Kingston depicts Ah Goong, Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, with a fabulous imagination, too. Ah Goong felt terribly homesick with no women to hug and comfort him during fearful nights.
Watching the stars one night, he “felt his heart breaking of loneliness” at the thought that “the railroad he was building would not lead him to his family” (*China Men* 129). He recognized the constellations from China…, the Spinning Girl and Cowboy, far, far apart. One deep night:


The stars he called out for were the Spinning Girl and Cowboy in a Chinese legend. The legend tells of a heavenly girl who fell in love with an earthly boy who were both transformed into stars and allowed by the Queen of the Sky to meet across the bridge of the Milky Way only once a year. This well-known legend is still used today to refer to a husband and wife that are separated from each other. Kingston uses this legend to expose the cruelty of immigrant laws that separated China Men from their wives, thus deprived them of their sexual life.

Elaine Kim comments that China Men “are victimized and kept womanless but they are never emasculated victims” (209). Instead, they are empowered with male potency. Like Bak Goong, Ah Goong did not spend his money on prostitutes. And like Bak Goong, he fulfilled his
sexual desires with a fabulous imagination: “he took out his penis under his blanket or bared it in the woods and thought about nurses and princesses. He also just looked at it, wondering what it was that it was for, what a man was for, what he had to have a penis for” (*China Men* 144). On one occasion, lowered in a wicker basket and seized by sexual desire, Ah Goong masturbates in the open air:

One beautiful day, dangling in the sun above a new valley, not the desire to urinate but sexual desire clutched him so hard he bent over in the basket. He curled up, overcome by beauty and fear, which shot to his penis. He tried to rub himself calm. Suddenly he stood up tall and squirted out into space. “I am fucking the world,” he said. The world’s vagina was big, big as the sky, big as a valley. He grew a habit: whenever he was lowered into the basket, his blood rushed to his penis, and he fucked the world. (133)

The act of Grandfather “fucking the world” startles many readers. Yet, Julia Lisella comments that “what is crucial in this passage is the ‘sexual desire’ that cannot be taken away by any regime or immigration system” (54). Such an act, as Tomo Hattori comments, “allows Ah Goong to identify with a masculine sexuality that is not limited by his economic station as a Chinese railroad worker” (216). In this sense, we can read
“fucking” as a form of male liberation, a form of mastery of the white power structure in terms of white male power over Chinese male laborers. Because, up there in the basket, Ah Goong is free of his bosses and in charge of his own body. Kingston thus illustrates that “body politics is a male as well as female issue, especially under the harsh conditions of an exploitive capitalist enterprise” (Lisella 65). Cheung comments that “Ah Goong’s defiant act of impregnating the world underscores both the insufferable deprivation of China Men and their strategies of survival through grandiose imagination” (Articulate Silences 104). Empowering the grandfathers with male potency, Kingston “reconstructs their gorgeous physicality and sexuality, their longings for the company of Chinese men, women, families and ethnic communities” (Ho 198).

What’s more, she rewrites Chinese American history by demonstrating that China Men are notemasculated victims.

Kingston reasserts the masculinity of Chinese immigrants of the first half of the twentieth century in their physicality and imaginative sexuality, too. In those years, as the economy changed, China Men were no longer working in labor camps. They started their restaurant or laundry business and were thought to be feminized for having to do women’s jobs. To challenge such stereotypes, Kingston portrays BaBa as sexually attractive: “Baba refashions himself as ‘Ed’ (after Thomas Edison, the
Glory (inventor), a modern man, literally and vainly ‘well suited’ to be part of the glitter dust of the 1920s Jazz Age in New York, when men lusted after the Gatsbian green light of romantic possibility in the American Dream” (Ho 202). In “The Father from China” chapter, Ed and his three laundry friends sought the expensive company of white dancing girls on weekends to allay sexual loneliness. They enjoyed their freedom, feeling that “The Gold Mountain was indeed free: no manners, no traditions, no wives” (*China Men* 61). Kingston writes:

> On Saturday Ed and Woodrow went to Fifth Avenue to shop for clothes. With his work pants, Ed wore his best dress shirt, a silk tie, gray silk socks, good leather shoes with pointed toes, and a straw hat…. The two of them strolled Fifth Avenue and caught sight of themselves in windows and hubcaps. They looked all the same Americans. (63, 64)

One afternoon, after Ed’s laundry partners trimmed one another’s hair with their barber’s shears and electric hair clippers in Ed’s professional style, parted in the middle, the four gentlemen went to a tearoom and danced with blonde girls:

> They danced until they had no more tickets. And they danced with as many different blonds as they pleased. And Ed was so handsome that some danced with him for free,
vied with one another to dance with him. He became bold enough to ask the friendliest one who had been studying his eyes, his high cheekbones, and neat nose, who had made him unbutton his sleeve and hold his tan arm against her pink arm, “You like come home with me? Please?”

“No, honey,” she said. “No.” (66)

This portrayal of BaBa and his laundry men dancing with blonde girls and inviting them home shows, on the one hand, that they possessed and expressed their sexual desires. On the other hand, the girls’ saying “No” to their invitation shows that they could not enjoy the kind of freedom in the sense they dreamed. This “juxtaposition of the Chinese and American romances exposes Ed’s carefree interlude in New York for what it is: a fool’s paradise” where their dreams of freedom captivated them (Cheung, *Articulate Silences* 107).

Such a captivating dream is told again in a short chapter, “The Ghostmate,” in which Kingston tells the legend of a young man who found shelter in the woods during a rain storm. There, in her big house, the “most beautiful woman he has ever seen” gave him food, clothing, and materials for his art (75). She promised to show him how to improve his work and make a lot of money. In return, the woman wanted his art: “I love this scroll. Let me have it. Don’t sell it.” “And these shoes.” She
Glory says, “I love this cup, its lines, its design, its handle. Let me keep it,” pulling things out of his pack (79-80). To obtain these, the woman talked about love and offered sex, reminding him “how unwifely her breasts and thighs are, how helpless her body works as he touches it” (80). Wandering like a ghost on his way home, the young man remembered “a beautiful lady he met in a previous incarnation or a dream last night” (81). The young man’s story is analogous of Chinese immigrants, who were desired for their skills and labor. Their romance with women, however, was nothing but a dream.

The young man’s story is symbolic of the nightmarish side of China Men’s dream in the Land of Women, where they were seduced with a spell. Just as the beautiful lady in the Ghostmate chapter exerted such a strong spell over the young man that he could not help but stop to visit her on his way home, Chinese immigrants were attracted to the Gold Mountain for its riches and found it hard to return to their homelands. Also, like the young man who was unable to “remain joined, connected” to the woman (80), Chinese immigrants, like strangers from a different shore, were excluded from citizenship and ownership of property. Kingston ends the Ghostmate chapter with “Fancy lovers never last” (81), to imply that the Land of Women was a fool’s paradise in which China
Men were included in the labor market but excluded from their right to stay. The mythic stories foreground such historical happenings.

Kingston claims China Men’s masculinity by portraying them as physically strong and sexually attractive. By reasserting male energy, Kingston presents the struggles of China Men in heroic terms. Her heroic portrayal, however, is different from the heroic tradition in which “men who have been historically subjugated are all the more tempted to adopt a militant stance to manifest their masculinity” (Cheung 244). In the last two decades, some Chinese American men such as the editors of Aiieeeee! and The Big Aiieeeee! have begun to correct the distorted images of Asian males projected by the dominant culture. In their attempt to eradicate effeminate stereotypes, the editors seem to be determined to show that Chinese and Japanese Americans have a heroic or militant heritage. They appeal to war heroes in Romance of the Three Kingdoms to convey to the American public that Chinese culture also has its Robin Hood and John Wayne - a Hollywood film star, an enduring America icon, known for his image of traditional masculinity - like the mainstream culture and literature. Asian American women writers and scholars are reassessing the entire Western code of heroism. They reconstruct Chinese American masculinity in different ways from the Aiieeeee! Editors.
In *China Men*, apart from exhibiting traditional Chinese masculine traits such as physical strength and responsibility for the family, Kingston portrays China Men as intelligent and resourceful people as well. Commenting on *China Men*, Goellnicht states that “‘feminine’ strategies of subversion from the periphery, from positions of apparent powerlessness - ‘the skill of …deceits’ (60) - are the very ones that brought success to the forefathers in their times of oppression” (“Tang Ao in America” 204). Bak Goong, for example, disguised his words in singing and coughing. Ah Goong fantasized with “nurses and princesses” (*China Men* 144). His “fucking the world,” in Lissela’s analysis, “stands for male energy, rather than male heroics” (65). Such male energy, though shocking, is more impressive than conventionally presented male heroics such as “loyalty, revenge, and individual honor as the overriding ethos” (Cheung, “The Woman Warrior Versus the Chinaman Pacific” 242). This new way of presenting manhood reveals the psychological and sexual frustration of China Men caused by exclusionary laws. At the same time, it serves effectively in reasserting China Men’s masculinity.

Like Geollnicht, Cheung argues that men of color who have been abused in white society are often tempted to restore their sense of masculinity by venting their anger and self-hatred at those who are even more powerless – the women and children in their families (*Articulate*
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_Silences_ 108). This is true of BaBa in _China Men_. Having been turned into feminine subject positions in America, BaBa lapses into silence, “breaking that silence only to utter curses against women as a means of releasing his sense of frustration and powerlessness in racist America” (Geollnicht, “Tang Ao in America” 201). Kingston describes her father’s anger in _China Men_:

You were angry. You scared us. Every day we listened to you swear, “Dog vomit. Your mother’s cunt. Your mother’s smelly cunt.” You slammed the iron on the shirt while muttering, “Stink pig. Mother’s cunt.” Obscenities. Worse than the swearing and the nightly screams were your silences when you punished us by not talking. You rendered us invisible, gone. (12, 14)

The daughter-narrator Maxine was angry at her father’s sexist behavior although she understood that it was to support the family that he had to endure physical labor. In exposing racism in America that subjugated _China Men_, Kingston, unlike her mother, does not remain silent about sexism in the home and in the Chinese American community. Goellnicht indicates that “she uses her marginal vantage point, not only to critique the racist mainstream for its treatment of her forefathers but also
to avenge herself on those very forefathers, the malestream, for their sexist treatment of Chinese women”. (203)

To challenge BaBa’s sense of manhood, Kingston “indicts her father’s sexism in the family, its way of replicating patriarchal violence in physical, emotional, and social terms” (Ho, Wendy 200). In doing so, she exposes the ugliness of her father’s behavior without reservations. For example, she describes her father’s anger when she and her younger sisters “goaded him, irked him-gikked him” on one occasion during his mental depression:

He chased my sister, who locked herself in a bedroom. “Come out,” he shouted. But of course, she wouldn’t, he having a coat hanger in hand and angry. I watched him kick the door; the round mirror fell off the wall and crashed. The door broke open, and he beat her. Only, my sister remembers that it was she who watched my father’s shoe against the door and the mirror outside fall, and I who was beaten. (253)

Telling such stories about BaBa, Kingston not only avenges her father for his abusive behavior, but more important, she suggests that Chinese American men “must reject the traditional Eastern/Western models of manhood that link masculinity with violence, racism, and sexism” (Ho 206). Part of Kingston’s work, therefore, is to “assess the damage” of
sexism, to articulate the emotional and social struggles which seriously strain a family and ethnic community (Ho 204). BaBa came from a patriarchal tradition in which women were regarded as inferior and subordinate to their husbands. Coming to America, BaBa did not give up such ideas. Having failed a couple of times in business, he became disillusioned about his ability to maintain a traditional notion of manhood. He turned his anger to the women in the home in his depressed state of mind. Yet, unlike The Woman Warrior, in which the author presents the conflicts and reconciliation between mother and daughter, in China Men, she goes beyond the father-daughter relationship. To Kingston, Father’s abusive practices must be critiqued as part of the recovery of a more liberating notion of manhood.

To recover a liberating notion of manhood in Chinese America, Kingston tells both heroic and loving stories of her forefathers. There is the story of a caring Great Grandfather, who sent his family his monthly wage with a sense of humor, bragging about his success: he “dictated a letter about how well and lighthearted he was in this Sandalwood paradise” (106). There is the story of the railroad grandfather as a loving husband who brought his wife a gold ring made from one bag of gold that he sifted - another example of Grandpa being cheated: the goldsmith said that his gold was not pure. Telling loving stories about her forefathers,
Kingston has constructed a new Chinese American masculinity. That is, men can be heroic and loving at the same time. They are not complete stories, but fragments of men’s stories recovered and retold by women, mostly by Kingston’s mother. The “talk-stories” about fathers are a source of empowerment for Chinese American women in their struggle against racism in society and sexism at home. These stories “enact the power of women in making and remaking culture”. (Ho 201)

To counter sexism in Chinese America, Kingston also tells stories about her two grandfathers in China. The maternal grandfather, for example, was “an unusual man in that he valued girls; he taught all his girls how to read and write” (30). The paternal grandfather, Ah Goong, too, valued girls. He desired a daughter so much that he traded his youngest son, Maxine’s father, for a girl in the neighborhood. It was, of course, idiotic and crazy of him to choose a girl over a boy, especially one who Grandma thought had the potential to be a scholar. Stopped by his powerful wife, Ah Goong went so crazy that he began “taking his penis out at the dinner table, worrying it, wondering at it, asking why it had given him four sons and no daughter, chastising it, asking it whether it were yet capable of producing the daughter of his dreams” (21). The stories about grandfathers in China are ironical because they were not sexist like the father in America. Such family history, as Ho comments,
“subverts the patriarchal valorization of boys in China....” It also
“subverts the notion that all Chinese men are sexist and incapable of
transgressing patriarchal values and norms”. (200)

Exposing her father’s abusive behaviors, however, Kingston shows
a good understanding that the racist society turned him into a sexist.
Therefore, Kingston addresses her father not simply as an exploited
worker of white patriarchal capitalism. She honors him as a successful
business owner as well. She tells “the persevering heroic story of her
father, who, swindled out of a partnership in a New York laundry and
exploited mercilessly by a casino owner, still managed to establish his
laundry in Stockton, California” (Chua 53). Kingston understands him as
a man who knows the brutalizing effects of survival in this country, and
the importance of the support of his wife and children. She, therefore,
restores his heroism by reflecting his experience from a defeated laborer
to a successful business owner.

Understanding that the tough social reality turned BaBa into
sexism and silence, Kingston also restores his love and humor. There was
a time when he was lighthearted, loving, and caring: he explained to his
wife the little English he knew, showed his sons some gongfu tricks-
Chinese martial arts also known as Wushu, and made paper planes and
played with his daughters. Kingston recounts that her parents crowded
into a child’s cot playing Vietnamese refugees under a blanket tent. The child’s cot served as “the boat” that Vietnamese immigrants used to flee from Vietnam to the United States after the end of the Vietnam War. Such memories demonstrate Father’s good sense of humor. Kingston feels a strong need to regain his voice, too. To do this, she honors him as a poet-scholar in his American transformation. In China, Father was a scholar. At his one-month birthday party, his mother gave him the Four Valuable Things -- ink, inkslab, paper, and brush, which promised education and indicated his promise as a scholar. Coming to America, the poet-scholar became a toilsome laundry man who was mute: “No stories. No past. No China” (CM 14). In seeking a talking cure that will challenge her silent father to respond to the anger and love of a daughter, the daughter-narrator engages in a conversation with him: “I will tell you what I suppose from your silence and few words, and you can tell me that I’m mistaken. You’ll just have to speak up with the real stories if I’ve got you wrong” (15). Such a conversation with him is “an invitation to her father to critical reflection and enactment of more radical social change” (Ho 205). Father did respond to the daughter’s invitation. In an interview Kingston indicates: “his answering me in poetic form is an ancient tradition. The ancient poets would write poetry back and forth to each other. And so my father and I communicated the way ancient scholars and poets did”. Kingston publicly honors their special communication.
She put his annotated copy of *China Men* in a museum exhibition of her work: “The Chinese translation of *China Men* has wide margins on each page, and my father wrote commentary in his copy. He did it in *Woman Warrior*, too…” (206). Kingston restores her father’s voice in the written communication between them.

The written communication between father and daughter proves that Father is an educated scholar with poetic talents. However, his inability to speak the English language prevents him from using his verbal and mental powers. What he needs now to be a complete being is to tell his-story, the very gift his daughter is giving him in this text of her fantasies, her imagination, her tabulations’ (Goellnicht 205). Telling his stories, the daughter-narrator regains her father’s voice and reasserts his masculinity. In fact, “he does not need a restoration of his phallic power: the filial attendance of his children and the attentions of Brave Orchid his wife demonstrate his ‘masculinity.’ Furthermore, he has the traditional Confucian solution to securing a place in society: procreation, family endurance and ‘the making of more Americans’” (Goellnicht 205). Resisting sexism, Kingston not only reclaims China Men’s heroism but also recovers their manhood in a modern sense.

Kingston tells the story of Qu Yuan in a short chapter called “The Li Sao: An Elegy,” translated as *Sorrow after Departure*. In Kingston’s
version, Qu Yuan is portrayed as a poet, a patriot, and, a pacifist. Telling the Li Sao Elegy, Kingston explains: Ch’ü Yüan, “also called Ch’ü Ping, meaning ‘Peace,’ was banished” (256). The Qu Yuan story, which symbolizes not only Chinese immigrants’ exile and patriotic status, but also their pacifist ideology, is followed immediately by the brother chapter entitled “The Brother in Vietnam.” The brother’s experience in 1960s America draws many of Kingston’s themes together. First, “an antiwar motif - countering also the policy lines of contemporary American governments - recurs throughout the book” (Cheung 119).

Before he joined the war, the brother was teaching in a high school where he told his students some atrocities to convince them about the wrongness of the war. He told them that the “military draft is not an American tradition. Protest against it is a longer tradition” (CM 285). His teaching makes his pacifist ideology clear.

Despite the fear that the war would destroy his beliefs and values, the brother nevertheless joined the war. The war experience enables Kingston to express her second theme: claiming America. Earlier in the grandfathers’ chapters, Kingston claims America by presenting their contributions to building America. Now, she claims her brother’s desire and right to be a U.S. citizen. Kingston explains the situation during the war years. The chances for him had narrowed to two: go to Canada or
enlist in the Navy. The Brother decided against Canada because he did not want to live the rest of his life as a fugitive and an exile. The United States was the only country he had ever lived in and he would not be driven out. He wanted to “hold firm to his American identity, a birthright inherited from the toil and triumphs of his forebears” (Chua 54). Among the Army, Air Force and Navy, he chose the Navy. His logic was that in the Navy he would follow orders up to a point short of a direct kill. That is, he would not shoot a human being as he might have to in the Army; he would not have to press the last button that dropped the bomb from the air. He would be a Pacifist in the Navy rather than in jail, no more or less guilty than the ordinary stay-at-home citizen of the war economy. Being enlisted, for him, became a way of being American.

Third, through her brother’s war experience, Kingston expresses her race theme. The brother involved himself in a war that he dreaded and did not want to fight, tormented by the fact that “they’d send a gook to fight the gook war” (CM 283). He had to go to war because he wanted to confirm his American identity. Unfortunately, he experienced racial discrimination even though he was an American citizen. The first few days in the Navy, for example, he was constantly harassed during training sessions by the company commander:

Nobody called him chink or gook or slope or Commie. The only racial harassment was when the company commander
stopped in front of him and hollered, “Where are you from?” and he had to shout out his hometown, Sir. “Louder. Where you from?” “Stockton, California. Sir.” “Where is that?” “West coast, Sir.” “What country?” “U.S.A., Sir.” Every time the Chief shouted at him, it wasn’t about his shoe shine or his attitude but “Where you from?” (286)

This was ridiculous because the commander either refused to believe that he was a U.S. citizen or distrusted him as he was not white.

The brother encountered such distrust in school, too, where his ideas were not taken seriously by his students. When he asked his class what steps they could take to stop the war in Vietnam, the students replied, “‘That is a communist question.’ ‘You think like that because you’re a Communist.’ Any criticism the brother had of America his students dismissed as his being gookish” (279). As Duncan comments, although “he is American, he is not entitled to the same privileges enjoyed by those who belong, including the privilege to critique the system” (70). Kingston conveys that “Asians in America have always been perceived as outsiders, as strangers, and as guests” (Duncan 71). As Lowe argues, “Asian American, even as a citizen, continues to be located outside the cultural and racial boundaries of the nation”. (6)
The brother experienced racism like his immigrant forefathers but in different ways. He was the school teacher his grandfathers could not be, but that ability to have a profession, to move him out of the laboring class, does not guarantee him any special privileges in America. His service in the Navy proves that he was trying to do his duty as an American citizen. However, he was not regarded as American. When he was recruited to teach the young men aboard the Navy ship how to read and write, as another example, the boys complimented him: “You speak English pretty good,” to which he had figured out what to answer: “Thank you, so do you,” but he was at a loss again. He did not feel like using sarcasm on these boys, nor would they understand it” (*China Men* 290). When he was promoted in the Navy, his Commanding Officer told him, “You’ve been run through a security check -” (298). Hearing that, the brother held his breath for fear of his family being deported. Kingston writes, “The government was certifying that the family was really American, not precariously American but super American, extraordinarily secure-Q Clearance Americans” (299). The government had to make sure he was not un-American with divided loyalties and treasonous intentions.

The brother, ironically, realized his Americanness on his tour of duty in Korea and Taiwan because he felt less at home in a Taipei street
than in the military base. He did not even feel at home in Hong Kong where his father’s hometown was close. When the Taiwanese asked him: “What are you?” he replied: “Chinese American” (296). Here, Kingston wants to claim his American identity as “Chinese American” without the hyphen. She once explained that “We ought to leave out the hyphen in ‘Chinese American,’ because the hyphen gives the word on either side equal weight…. Without the hyphen, ‘Chinese’ is an adjective and ‘American’ a noun; A Chinese American is a type of American”. Chua thinks that “Kingston is laying claim to the identity of Chinese as Americans whose centers of being are no longer even marginally in Asia” (55). Yet, meeting the people of his own race clarifies his identity as an ethnic Asian as well. This feeling was so strong that he was haunted by terrifying nightmares of himself walking among enemy corpses who became indistinguishable from his blood relatives in the Chinese American laundry: the faces of his own family, Chinese faces, Chinese eyes, noses, and cheekbones. The brother felt a bond with the people of his ancestry, which complemented the vision of Bak Goong who felt a bond with everyone and everything when he tried opium for seasickness. The brother realized that to recognize a deep bond between the peoples of the world is “to undo the binary opposition between friends and enemies” (Cheung, Articulate Silence 120). His encounters with Asians, in this sense, helped him find his in-between identity and clarify his identity
both as ethnic Asian and American. Through the brother, Kingston expresses her desire for world peace, for which she suggests bridging races, cultures, and nations. Such a dream is symbolically expressed in the brother’s name Han Bridge which connects the Han people like the bridge between Han and here: “We are the Han people from the Han Dynasty” (265). In this way, Kingston expresses one other theme: forging connections between Asia and Asian America. Kingston’s last chapter, “The Young Men Who Listen,” expresses her wish for young people to listen to the stories of China Men. Now she “could watch the young men who listen” (308). The implication is that the task of bridging Asia and Asian America involves putting faith in the future generation of Chinese Americans.