Chapter-I

The Diverse Voices of Chinatown

A survey of Chinese-American literary history would begin by pinpointing its origins and then moving forward to trace its growth. One has to be very careful about what exactly falls within the purview of Chinese-American literature. The usage of "Chinese-American" is currently accepted by a majority of the community and the American political structure, [to] refer to persons of Chinese ancestry residing permanently in the United States regardless of nativity.\textsuperscript{1} The community can trace its history to the first influx after the Gold Rush of 1848 and to the large scale importation of the workers to build the transcontinental railroad in the 1860s. Even though the group has contributed a lot to the progress of America, they were regarded as unassimilable - at best exotic. The policy of exclusion (1882-1943) which banned the entry of Chinese laborers, barred the resident Chinese from the formation of families is the expression of such an "othering attitude."\textsuperscript{2} So because of the exclusionist policies most of the Chinese-Americans thought of themselves as "huaqiao" or "Overseas Chinese." The Vietnam War and Civil Rights Movement led to the recognition of the Asians in America as an internally colonized ethnic minority. It was then that the term "Chinese-American," like its super-ordinate "Asian-American," took its current meaning "connoting at once a claim to full membership in American Society and inter-


\textsuperscript{2} "Chinese-American Literature" 39.
group coalition based on similarities in historical circumstances.”3 In understanding Chinese - American literature one would lay emphasis on the complex and reciprocal interactions” of material and discursive forces.

Most of the early immigrants to the U.S. were male laborers. Limited schooling, exclusion laws, extreme psychological hardship did not favor artistic creation. Although much material is not available, glimpses of early Chinese-American literature can be gained from Chen Yuanzhu’s *Taishan geyao ji* (A collection of Taishan folk rhymes)4 and Hu Zhaozhong’s *Maizhou Guangdong huaquai Liechuan geyao huibian*5 (A collection of folk rhymes popular among Cantonese in America). Many of the songs describe the reasons for leaving the home country, the pain of leaving the dear ones and the wish for success in the “Gold Mountain” (America).

Inspite of the efforts by various scholars, the oral tradition among the Chinese-American is by and large under-researched. It is only recently that Maxine Hong Kingston in her *The Woman Warrior* 6 and Amy Tan in her *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) 7 have made use of the “talk story.”

Translations have also played a major role in bringing forth many artistic creations which might have been lost. These translated works are also part of the Chinese-American canon. The poems carved by the detained immigrants on

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3 “Chinese–American Literature” 40.
Angel Island into the wooden walls have been collected under the title Island.\(^8\) The Angel Island was used between 1910-40 as an immigration station to screen out the Chinese with forged documents. Some of the poems are very angry and some of them are poignant voices of those early Chinese-American immigrants. These poems explode the myth of America as a nation open to all immigrants.

Marlon K. Horn translated some selected poems written from 1910-1915 into English and published them as Songs of Gold Mountain: Cantonese Rhymes from San Francisco Chinatown.\(^9\) These poems were not transcriptions of oral recitations but written by some better educated middle class members of poetic societies then active in San Francisco. A variety of topics like the hardships suffered by the Chinese in America, the dream of returning to China, the dreams of getting rich, the charms of the Chinatown prostitutes, the pain of getting separated from the family in China, Dr. Sun Yat-sen’s Republican Revolution, and the ways of emancipated women are covered in those poems. The tone is unpretentious, exuberant and invariably patriarchal. This collection can be considered a key document in the evolution of Chinese-American literature.

Currently Sui Sin Far –a Eurasian – is considered to be the first Chinese-American writer in English. Sui Sin Far is the pen name of Edith Eaton-daughter of an English father and a Chinese mother. She is read because of her Chinatown subject matter and non-stereotypical portrayals of the Chinese. Her

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prose narrative, "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian" 10 and short story collection Mrs. Spring Fragrance, 11 which are largely autobiographical, are considered as key contributions to the Chinese-American literary tradition. Her works can be fully appreciated only when one is aware of the racial biases and racial depictions of the Chinese during those times (late nineteenth century). The Chinese were almost always portrayed as meek, docile, shifty-eyed and too clever for their own good - in short something below the human level. Chinatown was generally presented as filthy, full of deceit, tongwars and sneaky old people. The setting was usually a phantasmic chinatown of ornamental orientalia and sexual degradation. Not surprisingly, many Chinese-American literary men came forth to dispel these images about their ethnic group. These type of writers were generally called "ambassadors of goodwill." They continued writing past the Exclusion Act's repeal in 1943, through World War II and the postwar period. However, these writers have been criticized to trade one type of orientalism for another. This can be a reason for the sixties writer's reaction against the intended audience. The "ambassadors of goodwill" include Wu Tingfang, author of America Through the Spectacles of an Oriental Diplomat, 12 Lin Yutang and Chiang Yee.

This does not mean that all the writers were concerned only with depicting the Chinatown life or being the "ambassadors of goodwill." H.T. Tsiang, a first-generation leftist writer of the 1930s, believed in the international proletarian movement and the Communist cause in China. His And China Has Hands 13 is

11 Sui Sin Far, Mrs. Spring Fragrance, eds. Amy Ling and Annette White-Parks (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1995).
12 Wu Tingfang, America through the Spectacles of an Oriental Diplomat (New York: Frederick S. Stokes, 1914).
considered as the “first fictional rendition of the bachelor society in English by a Chinese immigrant.”

The Second World War brought about the change in the position of the Chinese-Americans. Since China was America’s ally in this war, the receptivity towards the Chinese increased in America. This included the type of Chinese-American literature the people as well as the publishing industry favored. The “good” Chinese were distinguished from the “bad” Japanese. The Exclusion Act was repealed in 1943 and the Chinese were allowed to pursue various occupations which were earlier barred from them. This type of atmosphere helped many Chinese-American writers, especially women, to come out with their literary wares. During the 1940s a new America born class of bi-literate men and women emerged who believed in assimilation. These writers acted like cultural mediators. From this generation came Stanford and Harvard educated Pardee Lowe, whose *Father and Glorious Descendant* interprets Chinese customs for the white audience. Jade Snow Wong came out with *Fifth Chinese Daughter* in 1945 and it became a big hit and remains in print till today. These type of books have been termed as “autobiography as guided Chinatown tour.” Thus these writings were accepted mostly due to shifting international standards. Both these works chart the change in the Chinese-American life from tradition to modernity and from conformity to individual freedom.

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Jade Snow Wong in her writings is also concerned with her lowly status as a woman. Things would have been easier had she been a male. Like the African-American slave narratives, the works by women begin with the acquisition of literacy. Various autobiographies by Chinese-American women like Wong’s and later like Su-ling Wong’s *Daughter of Confucius* contain the accounts of how the author overpowered the gender norms and came to be highly educated and learned. Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong is of the opinion that “the female writer’s relationship to American culture is much more vexed than the male’s, for, given her subjected position in Chinese patriarchy, the woman’s first contacts with Western ways typically had some liberating effects, however the imperialistic or racist aspect or Westernization might play out in the long run.” The root causes of the conflict between feminism and cultural nationalism has been a complex interaction of gender, racial, ethnic and class politics.

The entry of the “warbrides” and the neutral families transformed life in the Chinatowns. But with the Korean and the Cold War, the Chinese were bad Asians again. A rare work like Louis Chu’s *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1973) provided a tale of romantic love and community renewal during this period. This novel exhibits a working-class, realist and “Chinatown” sensibility. Unlike other books of that period this is not an autobiography or any kind of attempt at mediation between cultures. Chu does not try to explain Chinese customs to the audience, on the other hand he describes the day-to-day community life of the Chinatown residents and also makes use of Chinatown English without

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19 “Chinese-American Literature” 46.
hesitation. To the *Aiieeeee!* 21 male writers Chu’s novel “represents the affirmation of a male literary tradition, an emblem of incorruptible Chinese-American cultural integrity.” 22 *Eat a Bowl of Tea* is particularly striking when compared to C.Y. Lee’s *The Flower Drum Song* 23 which catered to the white stereotypes.

The sixties generation of Asian-Americans turned their attention to literature in a non-academic manner. They were more keen on establishing the Asian-American cultural tradition as an integral part of the community’s larger struggle for a rightful place in the U.S.

In the early 1970s, *Aiieeeee!* was published by four young Californians, Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada and Shawn Hsu Wong, as an anthology of Asian-American literature. They asserted that this anthology defied the old stereotypes and expressed the genuine spirit of the Asian-Americans. It contains selection of works from various writers including Louis Chu, John Okada, Carlos Bulosan, Hisaye Yamamoto, and others. The editors were of the view that the Asian-Americans did not lack creativity, productivity and talent and alleged that the publishers refused Asian-American writings which contradicted popular racist views. “Americans’ stereotypes of ‘Orientals’ were sacrosanct and no one, especially a ‘Chink’ or a ‘Jap’ was going to tell them that America, not Asia, was their home, that English was their language, and that the stereotype of the Oriental good or bad, was offensive. What America published was, with rare exception, not only offensive

22 "Chinese-American Literature" 48.
to Chinese and Japanese-America, but was ‘actively inoffensive’ to white sensibilities.”  

Combined Asian Resources Project (CARP) was formed to find, revive and reprint little known works of Asian-American literature that express unstereotyped aspects of the Asian-American experience. CARP have brought to the press Carlos Bulosan’s *America Is In the Heart* (1973), John Okada’s *No-No Boy* (1976), Louis Chu’s *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1973), and Monica Sone’s *Nisei Daughter* (1979). Besides a new collection of old stories by Bienvenido N. Santos under the title *Scent of Apples* (1979) and Toshio Mori’s novel *Woman from Hiroshima* (1978) were also published.

Frank Chin is of the view that the new Chinese-American identity should be built around Asian-American’s being accepted as American. He is very keen on defining the Asian-American manhood and is of the view that the Chinese-American men have not been permitted to speak in America. He regrets the fact that more Chinese-American women are published than men and believes that literary creativity is the proper domain of men rather than women, “[I]n this culture [manliness means] aggressiveness, creativity, individuality, just being taken seriously.” He accuses Jade Snow Wong, Betty Lee Sung and Virginia Lee, Maxine Hong Kingston for accommodating an exoticized version of Chinese-American identity and catering to the racist view held by the majority.

Frank Chin feels that it is very important to change the image of the Asian-American as a passive creature. The new identity of an Asian-American should be built around his being accepted as an American. For this he has to escape

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from the limitations of the glittering Chinatown ghetto. Many of his works feature Chinatown as a dead and decaying place, where old men come to die and the young progressive individuals want to escape from. Chin’s short pieces of fiction like “Food For All His Dead,”26 “Yes Young Daddy,” 27 and “Goong Hai Fot Choy,”28 explore this theme. These three stories demystify the images of Chinatown. Johnny and Fred, the main characters of “Food for all his Dead” and “Yes Young Daddy” are sensitive young men who have outgrown Chinatown, Chinese women and all the things Chinatown is associated with. But they are not confident if they can survive without it.

Johnny in “Food For All His Dead” feels that people in Portsmouth Square are like “oily things and bugs floating on a tides; they stand in ‘puddles of each other’ ”(56). He finds the Chinese women look like “clumps of huge beetles with white faces” and the Chinese music like “birds being strangled” (63). His girlfriend Sharon’s hands have a dry feeling, cold and dry like skin of tissue-paper covered flesh” (62). He feels vastly superior to the people around him. Chinatown is too narrow for him. He feels that nobody understands his thoughts or his identity crisis. He wants to go out and explore the world outside Chinatown. He cannot understand what being “Chinese” in America is.

In “Yes Young Daddy” the protagonist assumes the role of a father figure for Lena. He visits Chinatown and realizes that he can not and does not want to act like a hero for the young people of the Chinatown. He feels that he has his

own identity to worry about. “No more worrying about anybody but number one for me” (199). For him “home” is somewhere far away from Chinatown.

In “Goong Hai Fot Choy” Dirigible’s dying mother is emblematic of the decaying Chinatown. His mother is despicable, “a cadaver acting charming and sexy” (33). Similarly Chinatown is fading behind the glittering façade. For Dirigible the Chinatown is like a deserted wasteland. Everything in this wasteland is useless, deserted, frozen, dead cold or sleeping.

Johnny, Fred and Dirigible have outgrown Chinatown, and they can only watch it die. But the older generation is immersed in self-deception and refuse to believe that the system they have believed in is crumbling and falling to pieces.

Frank Chin is of the firm opinion that the Asian-American culture cannot be found by imitating whites or blacks. The Asian-Americans should not be forced into an American or Chinese slot. They should not allow themselves to be used as “model minority.” But instead of presenting any solution to the problem / alternative set of values / in place of the decaying Chinatown, Chin creates an “overriding sense of the utter futility of the male protagonist’s efforts to redefine himself.”29 He asserts that the task of the Asian-American is to “legitimize the language, style, and syntax of his people’s experience, to codify the experiences common to his people into symbols, clichés, linguistic mannerisms and a sense of humor that emerges from an organic familiarity with the experience.”30

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30 *Aiiieeee!* xxxvii.
Although Chin tries to depict the Asian-American manhood, his characterization is incomplete. The characters are unable to act because of their sense of impotence. He depicts the Asian-American male as a victim of his community, his family and women in general. Chin leaves his reader with the impression of futility, "death and decay, his sexism, cynicism and sense of alienation have prevented him from creating protagonists who can overcome the devastating effects of racism on Chinese-American men."31

Jeffery Paul Chan is also concerned about the problem of identity for the young Chinese-American male. In "Jackrabbit" young Frankie insists that he is an Indian and not a Chinese and visits the white whores. All this he does to establish his masculine identity. He works with old Pete, a bachelor, whose life in America has been "like a fearful amnesia filled with the feeling of hunger and despair and the loneliness he discovered in the human zoo" 32 of Chinatown. He recalls his life with other aging bachelors,

"huddled with their legs drawn to their tight scrotums, talking of women, imagining the idylls of an afternoon spent under the warm quilt of a perfumed singsong girl, imagining enough for the months and years spent in America. All the little grunts and squeals they remembered, a kind of helpless awe at their own strength."33

31 "Chinatown Cowboys and Warrior Women" 189.
33 "Jackrabbit" 227.
Pete wants to father young Frankie but he cannot help him in any way because his own life has been stunted. The only things he can offer are the futile dreams of returning to China and making him aware of his Chinese identity.

Chan is also concerned with shattering the myth of an exotic Chinatown. He emphasizes the futility of myths about China and the Chinatown. In "Auntie Tsia Lays Dying," Auntie Tsia tells various stories about China to the young narrator. But she stereotypes herself by confusing memory with dreams. The narrator is unable to make any sense of her present or her past.

To the people living in the Chinatown it is like a home where they can relax and live with dignity. But for the narrator it is a dead place, without any value. Chinatown and Auntie Tsia are like her fish store, dusty, dimly lit, and having a secret self. To the narrator it is like a place of death, whose listless celibacy and sterile incompleteness are thinly covered by a cheap façade. The narrator’s attempt to understand Auntie Tsia and her life is in fact his effort to understand Chinatown and its life.

Both the writers, Chin and Chan, are not very hopeful of forging a positive identity for the Chinese-American male. Chan is hostile towards the native-born Chinese and the women writers. Thus unwittingly he joins their oppressors in expressing a bleak future for the Asian-Americans, a feeling shared by many other writers,

"There is no doubt in my mind that the Asian-American is on the doorstep of extinction.

There’s so much out-marriage now that all

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that is going to survive are the stereotypes.
White culture has not acknowledged Asian-American art. Either you’re foreign in this country, or you’re an honorary white. I hope we can create work that will add to the human estate, but then I think we’ll die out.”

The gloom and pessimism of Chin and Chan are counterbalanced by Shawn Hsu Wong’s short novel *Homebase.* In this the main characters are able to reaffirm their roots in American soil. The father and son are united because of their link in the American soil and the book ends with the triumphant reaffirmation of the Chinese-American heritage.

Rainford, the Chinese-American narrator, claims America as his own and reaffirms his love for his ancestors. Thus he can affirm his identity “‘[I] identity is a word full of home. Identity is a word that whispers, not whispers, but gets you to say, ever, ever yours …. Dear Father, I say, I write, I sing, I give you my love, this is a letter, whispering those words, ‘ever, ever yours.’”

With the entry of Maxine Hong Kingston’s highly controversial *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* the Chinese-American literary scene shifts its focus. This book problematizes the generic definitions and “the idea of representational responsibility in ‘ethnic’ writing.” The subtitle is *Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* and the book was marketed as an autobiography. But this includes personal reminiscences, imaginative reconstructions and outright fantasies. The book deals with the mother-daughter

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37 *Homebase* 31-32.
38 “Chinese-American Literature” 50.
relationship, and is a vociferous attack on sexism in Chinese as well as the American culture, and emphasize the need to break silences. Thus it can be considered a feminist text and can be put into postmodern category because of the intricacy of its formal structure and of the epistemological issues. More popular with the mainstream reader rather than the Chinese-American reader, *The Woman Warrior* thus raises the question of “misreading and appropriation.”³⁹

This book was attacked upon by Frank Chin and other male writers. Chin criticized Kingston for moulding the folktales and traditions according to her convenience. She has been dubbed as a representative of an inauthentic and fake Chinese-American tradition - misogynist, exoticized and inauthentic. She has been regarded as anti-orientalist as well as neo-orientalist, Chin considers her the latter. To counter such attacks Kingston came out with *China Men*.⁴⁰ In this she valorizes the Chinese-American males. But the controversy started by *The Woman Warrior* still rages on.

Maxine Hong Kingston was not the one to introduce feminist writings in the Chinese-American literature. Many works by women writers like Ruthanne Lum McCunn’s *Thousand Pieces of Gold*,⁴¹ Alice Lin’s autobiographical *Grandmother Had No Name*⁴² Fae Myenne Ng’s novel *Bone*⁴³ focus on matrilineality. Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*, has been another bestseller like *The Woman Warrior*, traces the stories of four mother-daughter pairs. *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*⁴⁴ by Kingston is a formally and stylistically

³⁹ “Chinese American Literature” 50.
⁴² Alice Pu Lin, *Grandmother Had No Name* (San Francisco: China Books and Periodicals, 1988).
innovative work. The main character, Wittman Ah Sing, a 1960s Chinese-American playwright is partially modeled on Frank Chin. In this work Kingston “alludes to Asian American cultural history and ... plays with both Chinese literary classics and the Euro-American canon, and gestures towards the possibility of a community-building, myth making Chinese American art.”

David Henry Hwang’s award-winning Broadway play *M. Butterfly*, rekindles the Kingston-Chin controversy. This work was immediately hailed as central to the Chinese—American literary tradition. In fusing this story to the outlines of Puccini’s opera, *Madame Butterfly*, it works to deconstruct sexism, orientalism and imperialism, the ongoing concerns in the literary tradition. However, this work has been bitterly criticized by the Chinese-American male writers who allege that the play reinforced the Orientalist stereotype.

Now-a-days instead of emphasizing, cultural nationalism and American nativity, the writers focus more on heterogeneity and diaspora. The emphasis has switched to that of ethnicity, gender, class and sexuality. They have shifted their focus from social history and communal responsibility to postmodernism and multiculturalism. However, King-kok points out that term “shift” can be misleading “for the recent critical moves have by no means replaced earlier exigencies.” Although there is a change in focus, the different approaches to Chinese-American identity exist in tandem, underscoring the community’s need for recognition in America, the nation of nations.

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45 “Chinese-American Literature”51.