



Chinese Women Traversing Diaspora

Memoirs, Essays, and Poetry

Edited by Sharon K. Hom

CHINESE WOMEN
TRAVERSING DIASPORA
MEMOIRS, ESSAYS, AND POETRY

EDITED BY
SHARON K. HOM

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Series Editor's Foreword

The United Nations Fourth International Conference on Women in Beijing (September 1995) prompts me to think about what feminists have achieved after more than four decades of organizing around issues of social and economic justice for women. I realize that civil rights are not the same as economic justice. While issues such as health, nutrition, reproductive rights, violence, misogyny, and women's poverty and labor struggles have achieved widespread global recognition, women still constitute the world's poor and the majority of the world's refugees. The so-called structural adjustment policies of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank continue to have a devastating impact on Third World women. Militarization, environmental degradation, heterosexist state practices, religious fundamentalism, and the exploitation of poor women's labor by multinationals all pose profound challenges for feminists as we look toward the twenty-first century.

While feminists across the globe have been variously successful, we inherit a number of challenges our mothers and grandmothers faced. But there are also new challenges as we attempt to make sense of a world indelibly marked by the failure of postcolonial capitalist and communist nation-states to provide for the social, economic, spiritual, and psychic needs of the majority of the world's population. At the end of the twentieth century, globalization has come to represent the interests of corporations and the free market rather than self-determination and freedom from political, cultural, and economic domination for all the world's peoples.

These are some of the challenges addressed by the Garland series *Gender, Culture, and Global Politics*. It takes as its fundamental

premises 1) the need for feminist engagement with global as well as local ideological, economic, and political processes, and 2) the urgency of transnational dialogue in building an ethical culture capable of withstanding and transforming the commodified and exploitative practices of global culture and economics. The series foregrounds the necessity of comparative feminist analysis, and scholarship and seeks to forge direct links between analysis, (self-) reflection, and organizing. Individual volumes in the series provide systematic and challenging interventions into the (still) largely Eurocentric and Western women's studies knowledge base, while simultaneously highlighting the work that can and needs to be done to envision and enact crosscultural, multiracial feminist solidarity.

Chinese Women Traversing Diaspora: Memoirs, Essays, and Poetry, the third volume in the series, is an elegant and creative text that embodies the above premises. It focuses on questions of identity, social location, voice, and the possibilities of feminist solidarity. This text not only complicates our understanding of diasporas, immigrants, refugees, and travelers, but also of the meanings of citizenship, of being U.S. American. Zhang Zhen says in her poem "In America"

In America all memories about wandering
Are thrown onto pile of car junks
Burning in the wasteland
Learn how to be a mute circle
Under the boundless clear sky

The writings in this collection cover a wide range of genres, from poetry, memoir, and critical essays, to a roundtable conversation on the Fourth World Conference in Beijing. What holds the writings together is the thoughtful, critical tone naming various migratory histories, and examining in great depth the fraught relationships all immigrants, travelers and settlers to the U.S.A. have to negotiate—between communities of origin and communities of choice. One of the most important contributions of this text is in its mapping of questions of **being and becoming** for Chinese women. It is a rare collection, encapsulating in sharp, evocative terms, the diasporic journeys of Chinese women.

As Sharon Hom suggests in her introduction, this collection is a cartography of many points of arrival, and of a "point of no return."

What does it mean to be Chinese? What does it mean to be Chinese American? What does it mean to create alternative paradigms to read history and to dream about a future? What is the place of Chinese women in feminist and racialized communities and discourses, and in citizenship debates? What does it mean to be a part of the Chinese diaspora? How can we build communities of choice which foreground ethico-political agency? These are some of the questions taken up by law professors, journalists, women's studies scholars, literature and film studies professors, choreographers, dancers, tai-chi practitioners, and translators. The writings cross disciplinary, intellectual and spiritual lines.

Chinese Women Traversing Diaspora is a moving and inspiring testament to the radical possibilities embedded in "leaving home." This book illustrates the spirit of comparative feminist praxis that this Garland series is committed to.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty
Ithaca, New York

Acknowledgments

In 1994, while I was attending the annual meeting of the National Women Studies Association, I had the good fortune to discover that I occupied the room next door to Chandra T. Mohanty. Like many other women at the conference, I had read and been inspired by her work, and so I introduced myself. Encouraged by her warmth and intellectual generosity, I mentioned a project on Chinese women that I had been incubating for some time. She later slipped a flyer for this Gender, Culture, and Global Politics series under my door. From that moment of feminist synchronicity, this collection of memoirs, essays, and poetry developed. For this gift of intellectual and political space created by Chandra's vision for the series and faith in this project, I owe my deepest appreciation and thanks. To the contributors who were willing to explore this space with such imagination, honesty, and critical intelligence, I express much love and thanks for their patience, support, and friendship. I also want to thank Bob Lee and Eleanor Yung for access to the Asian American Arts Centre archives where I discovered the wonderful artwork of Mary Ting.

Numerous colleagues and friends have also supported this project. I especially thank my dean, Kristin Booth Glen, for her unfailing encouragement for all my writing projects (even when they did not appear to be directly related to law). I am grateful to Rey Chow, Maggie Chon, and Russell Leong for their generous readings of and invaluable comments on drafts of the entire manuscript; and additionally to Russell Leong for lending his fine poet's ear to brainstorming titles. Thanks also to Penny Andrews, Keith Aoki, Mary Lu Bilek, Sue Bryant, Bob Chang, Kandice Chuh, John Cicero, Pamela Goldberg, Julie Lim, Maureen McCafferty, Paul O'Neil, Ruthann

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CHINESE WOMEN
TRAVERSING DIASPORA

Introduction: Points of No Return

Sharon K. Hom

We are too anxious to become strangers to ourselves
As though the farther we fare from the starting point, the better
We forget too many things.

Zhang Zhen, "Too Many Things Forgotten"

In a fading family photo, my five-year-old self, framed by the airplane door, clutching an old doll, steps into that first moment of arrival. I am looking down to avoid falling. In perfectly fluent Cantonese, I disappointedly tell my father, whom I am meeting for the first time, how short he is, not as I had imagined at all. In a lifetime since then, my Cantonese has acquired a northern American accent, and many realities were indeed not as I had imagined. I have also become fluent in the foreign languages of an adopted homeland and a profession of choice. Yet within the destabilizing and contested discourses of the "post,"¹ the politics of location, and identity politics, the matter of "becoming" is clearly neither transparent nor unproblematic. As multiply inscribed subjects, "becoming" as well as being "belongs to the future as much as to the past, subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. . . . [I]dentities . . . are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past"²—and, one might add, the transforming narratives of possible alternative futures.

As Chinese women writing and traversing diaspora, the ideological and material inscriptions of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality are implicated in and problematize our multiple positionings. Yet, we do not suggest that "Chinese women" is a static, coherent, stable subjectivity. One of the working titles for this volume was *Chinese Women in Diaspora*. As the static-ness and false locational stability of

the “in” became apparent rather quickly, we searched for a naming that would suggest ambiguity, ongoing process, and the complexity of the various intellectual, artistic, and personal trajectories of these memoirs and essays. Given the inadequacy of existing languages and the impoverishment of terms through formulaic invocations, each effort at naming also implicated other discursive challenges. Settling on *traversing* (a poet friend’s suggestion), a verb fluidly inscribed with constructive as well as transgressive possibilities, the present title signals our provisional reconstructions and gestures toward destabilizing movement itself as a locus of being that transcends narratives of linear trajectories or oppositional dichotomies.

In the overdetermined naming of migratory histories, the contributors are immigrants, foreign students, settlers, permanent residents, citizens, and travelers. Originating from Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong, and traversing through Sweden, and Japan, and the United States, with global family networks stretching through China, Canada, Australia, the Caribbean, Latin America, and Europe, our blurred points of arrival and departures span different generations, and different local cultures and dialects. We are geographic inhabitants of various overseas Chinese diaspora communities. We are also figurative inhabitants of imagined heterogeneous and hybrid communities, and we are participants in horizontal alliances. As outsiders and insiders resisting minoritized hyphenated categories, we inhabit shifting centers and peripheries, where the demarcations are increasingly porous. And we share a sense of the difficulty of a return.

As Zhang Zhen asks—already knowing the answer:

Should I be buried in this foreign land
or drift back like white rain
and drop into the lake of my hometown?
—as if that place would ever let me return.³

Mapping intellectual trajectories, artistic explorations, and spiritual journeys, these essays and memoirs excavate the destabilized points of origins, transits, and arrivals. In my own circlings, I often find myself “lost in translation,” in Eva Hoffman’s words, still cradling” a tenderness for everything that is always lost.”⁴ Yet, in the face of serious ethico-political challenges presented by a pervasively unjust global (dis)order, it is important to resist the lure of simply romanticizing a reimagined past. The foregrounding of the particular in

these personal narratives simultaneously and politically deploys, a "strategic essentialism"⁵ that Lisa Lowe has termed an "Asian American necessity." This volume might then be viewed as contributing to the project of "restoring historical and locational specificity to the heterogeneous experiences and struggles of Third World Women" within a transnational circuit.⁶ However, instead of projecting "representative" global narratives, these memoirs and essays grounded in, and crossing multiple deterritorialized, yet grounded localities, might be viewed as a type of auto-ethnographies, field reports written by native informants from/to reconfiguring fields.

Through these mappings of the complexities of "becoming" as well of "being" of diasporic experience, the contributors claim overlapping relationships to multiple communities of origin and choice, relationships that do not necessarily privilege race, ethnicity, gender, or any single locus of identity. Many of the themes that surface throughout these essays—border crossings, authenticity, representation, "subjecting" multiple selves and losing one self, agency and constituency, and questions of multiple loyalties and accountability—resonate and often parallel each other. Yet, situated in a localized historicity, invoking global diasporic intersections, and often marked by disciplinary resonances, they do so distinctively in each writer's own voice, including a language of silences. In developing her essay, each contributor has had to also explore a comfort zone for personal narrative that is inflected by disciplinary training, personal style, and professional experiences. This volume connects these personal narratives with a collective reflection project, a Round Table on the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995). In this discussion developed out of a series of E mail exchanges, a group of Chinese women who attended the Beijing NGO Forum present their experiences and reflections on various efforts to negotiate a complex political agency across a transnational terrain.

To introduce and contextualize individual essays and memoirs and the roundtable, I also offer some readings organized under the following subsections: Multiple Selves, Erasure of Selves; Complicating "Chineseness"; Complicating Diaspora; and Elder Half-Sisters, Dragons, and Ethico-Political Agency. Each of the readings might just as easily be reconfigured to fit under any of these sections. As intersectionality analysis underscores, our layered lived experiences and struggles cannot be enclosed within discrete social markers or categories or subjected to hierarchical identity affiliations.⁷ We offer

these narratives in an effort to enrich collective understandings of the differences embedded in Chinese diaspora and Chinese women's experiences and to complicate current discursive paradigms (in)forming identity politics and difference debates. As many critical race feminists have argued, one problem with identity politics (aside from its rhetorical fatigue) is that its essentialist moves frequently conflate intragroup differences.⁸

For example, Asian American studies since the 1960s has been criticized for its assumption of heterosexuality, its subordination of issues of social class and gender, the normalization of Asian American history as masculine, and its cultural nationalism.⁹ Although many of the contributors to this volume resist the domestic frames of Asian American minority discourses and the flattening effect of an Asian American label, this volume's focus on Chinese foreign-born women may contribute productively to current theoretical and political debates within the United States. By offering narratives that complicate and dislodge ethnicity as a master category, these essays and memoirs are reminders of the importance of not allowing diverse experiences to be subsumed, erased, or homogenized into a monolithic Asian American, Asian, or Chinese experience, or by global or masculinist discourses.

In the growing literature of Asian women writing in/from diaspora,¹⁰ this volume also offers an expanded range of interdisciplinary voices. In addition to academics, the contributions in this volume also include the perspectives of practitioners and nonacademics. They include two law professors, a journalist, a historian, poets and writers, women's studies scholars, literature and film scholars, a choreographer, dancers, tai-chi practitioners, and translators. In the face of disciplinary imperatives to label and to enclose work within genres and fields, these essays, memoirs, and the Beijing roundtable might be viewed as belonging to cultural studies, law, performing arts, journalism, literature, women's studies, history, and international human/women's rights.

Except for its sotto voce presence as the nation-state in the wings of immigrant narratives or its predominantly Eurocentric voice in English-language law and literature texts,¹¹ law is curiously marginal or only a minor disciplinary voice in the current discourses of cultural studies and the theoretical landscapes of the "post." The two law essays in this volume, by Margaret Woo and myself, offer two narratives; both are mediated through a law-trained lens and reflect critical stances to the role of law and legal discourse. In the first essay, "[Un]fracturing

Images: Positioning Chinese Diaspora in Law and Culture,” Margaret Woo examines the co-implicated historical interaction of law, racism, and personal re-imagination. She intertwines personal stories with an account of the racism, orientalizing images, and misperceptions of Chinese/Asians reflected in the history and current resurgence of nativism and antiforeign sentiment in the United States. In the discussion of the historical legacy of Asian Americans and of the foreign-born in the United States, she names the complicity of law through Supreme Court cases and state and federal legislation in maintaining the exclusion and discrimination against the early Chinese immigrants.

In my essay, “ [Per]forming Law: Deformations and Transformations,” I offer an excavation of memory, the always-already-micro-political, to retrace my Hong Kong beginnings, how I got to law, and name some of the micro-aggressions, deformations, and other occupational hazards I encountered along the way. After years of writing in and resisting the language(s) of law, I do not know if it is possible to speak unmediated by law’s disciplinary structures and claims of authority and legitimacy.

MULTIPLE SELVES, ERASURE OF SELVES

In her essay, “Self-reinstating and Coming to ‘Conscious Aloneness’, Ma Yuanxi traces her literal journey to the United States and her figurative journey of an intellectual and emotional search for a “self of one’s own,” a self that escapes the ideological enclosures of a party-inscribed self. Coming of age under Mao, Ma Yuanxi’s essay narrates a micropolitical struggle and names the violence of authoritarian state-enforced regimes of meaning and personhood that create “docile tools.” At the core of the demands of Chinese Communist Party doctrine to achieve self-oblivion, self-effacement, and self-abandonment, she locates the ideological prison that results in the dissolution of self. She compares this construction and destruction of self to the Chinese art of crafting dough figures (*nie mianren*), the “self manifested was a self that conformed to the Party’s standards. . .that looked ‘correct,’ in the Party’s eye and the public eye.” She traces the deterioration of her faith in a contradictory Communist Party ideology that demanded simultaneously a self-effacing individualism and an explicit individual revolutionary heroism. She also explores the “uneasiness” of questions ignored, her struggle to look at “what kind of person” she had become,