BETWEEN WORLDS

Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry

Amy Ling

Rockefeller Fellow

Queen's College

City University of New York

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For Mother and Father
and everyone
between worlds.

. . . "we're caught in between times and in between worlds . . . There are no uncomplicated Chinese left anymore."

—Lin Tai-yi, *The Eavesdropper*

Contents

Foreword

As a picture encompasses a universe of cognition, so should words, like stones, embody a permanency of meaning, bear witness to enduring reality. Amy Ling's book is of this quality. It is a breakthrough not only in the sphere of Western studies on the manifold aspects of China, but also a beacon light for Chinese historians. The latter have been so preoccupied with events in China itself and its many metamorphoses, matrix of a world on its own, that they have not come to terms with the *diaspora*, the overseas Chinese, 50 million of them today counting the generations, nor with their contributions both in labor of body and exertion of mind to the world at large.

It was the era of the gun and the dreadnought, of violence in the name of civilization, of that vile and reviled yet inescapable historical phenomenon called colonialism, that produced the diaspora. They left by the thousands, over two centuries, the "bitter strength," the collies, driven by the starvation and misery brought about by colonial plunder, to build the railways of America and Canada, to dig the Panama canal . . . three hundred thousand of them during World War I were required by Great Britain and France to man their man-depleted factories because so many of their own workers died in the trenches of that grotesque conflict.

There were very few women in these first migrations, not only forbidden by the powers that ruled these near-slaves, but also because the Chinese Empire did not want to export its women. But later women did come, in small numbers. And it is marvelous to discover in this book that in the mid-nineteenth century two women, two Eurasians, product of that mingling of two worlds totally opposed to each other, were the first to break the smothering silence that buries all history.

History only is if it is recorded. They wrote history. The story of the diaspora as seen by the women first aware that they were between two worlds, two cultures, women who had to survive in their souls. They were the first to make that imagination leap, discovering what it is to live in perpetual

contradiction, between master and slave, the highly valued and the inferiorized.

Eurasian. So long despised, as I know so well, I who have lived through contempt and contumely, I who continue to fight against an ingrained racism, an unconscious one. For upon those who live between two worlds was imposed a spurious and in the end ignoble choice. "You must be the one or the other." Which implied a service to be performed for one or the other representatives of a culture. I rejected this diminution of the self, this having to survive. *I shall be both.* Amy Ling's book makes me discover, to my delight, that I had predecessors, forebears, women who refused to be anything but their own entirety.

What perturbs me about academic studies in the West is an unconscious intellectual *apartheid*, disguised as concern, sometimes benevolent probing, or, what is worse, as objective scholarship. Perhaps this should be matter for a deeper investigation.

Amy Ling's book gives us that family of woman warriors—such a felicitous word, coined by Maxine Hong Kingston—a family to which, I found to my surprise, I too belong by the skin of my teeth.

The woman warriors of Asia are many. Action warriors, like Joan of Arc—and how many of them were burnt at the stake, right up to the nineteenth century, as witches?—and word warriors, those who became literate, and wrote, and survived, and gave us that first aperture into another state of being, another wholeness.

Woman, warring against those man-imposed images, the Suzy Wong, the Madame Butterfly, submissive and delightful sex objects to be used and discarded with hypocritical regret.

Not all the examples, the quotations, in this book are centered on the phenomenon of existing, surviving, and creating between two worlds. Some—and I do not blame them—have achieved fame by pandering to that nostalgic image of a China that never was, save for an infinitesimal number of the elite. But never mind. This is the beginning of a worthwhile exploration, all the more valuable because it shows us the lacunae, the compromises in which some of the writers cited entered, to pander to the superior culture—or so it seemed. These are the books lauded as "authentic," when they are only tasty rehash of what pleases ingrained prejudice. But so many, so many, despite this fear of saying too much too soon, have gone beyond that imposed, seemingly impenetrable Great Wall of pompous prejudice disguised as academia.

I predict that in the future this book will stand as the first milestone in a long march to understanding our world to be, a world of Eurasians, Eurafricans . . . a world where culture is no longer used as a weapon to impose inferiority.

October 1989 *Han Suyin*

Preface

Like Alice Walker, but from a different cultural background, I too have felt compelled to go "in search of our mothers' gardens," and this book is the fruit of my search. Born in Beijing, brought to the United States at age six and educated here from first grade through a PhD in comparative literature, at a time when the "classic" authors were white and nearly all male, I had never encountered in all my reading any Chinese American authors or even Chinese characters, except Bret Harte's "Heathen Chinee." I can still remember the red hot humiliation I experienced as my fourth grade teacher in Mexico, Missouri, read Harte's verse aloud to the class. I remember, too, her sudden embarrassed realization that my perspective on the poem was radically different from hers; she had never had to consider the Chinese perspective before.

Thus, when I first read Maxine Hong Kingston's *A Woman Warrior* and was asked to review Nellie Wong's chapbook of poems, *Dreams From Harrison Railroad Park*, I was thunderstruck. Here were people like me creating moving and artistic literature from our shared Chinese American experience. They expressed the struggle for personal balance that is the experience of every American of dual racial and cultural heritage, but, specifically, they wrote with pride and affirmation out of our common Chinese American background. My reading of these writers followed upon discoveries in the 1960s and 1970s by African American and feminist scholars working to reclaim their literary history, unearthing such neglected masterpieces as Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." I wondered if other Chinese women in America had produced memorable literature, if Kingston had had forerunners. If so, who were they? What had they chosen to express of our bicultural experience, and how they had done it?

Thus, I began the journey "in search of [my] mothers' gardens." Walker

spoke for me when she wrote in "Saving the Life That is Your Own," "the absence of models, in literature as in life . . . is an occupational hazard for the artist, simply because models in art, in behavior, in growth of spirit and intellect—even if rejected—enrich and enlarge one's view of existence."[1] The lack of models is an occupational as well as an emotional hazard, not only for the artist but for everyone. My search for models, however, brought together the scholarly and the personal in a way that I had never experienced before. I felt a harmony and a wholeness, for each author uncovered, not only enlarged the general field of American literature, as I saw it, but enriched and validated my existence. I learned that I am not a unique and peculiar aberration, that not every Chinese in America is an engineer or a scientist, that others have also gone the literary route. I realized that uncovering these writers and publishing this book may make the way easier for those who follow. Alice Walker has written that black women with calloused hands have appeared to her in dreams to shake her hand and to thank her for speaking for them.[2] I too have seen certain of my writers in dreams, and I have spoken with others in the flesh. As Walker says, "If we kill off the sound of our ancestors, the major portion of us . . . is lost." I hope this book will capture the sound of my ancestors and speak to others yet to come.

In one way, this book is also an answer to my father, who asked me a question that has rankled in me since it was posed, when I was 13 or so. "Why is it," he asked in an innocent tone, "that those who excel in every field, even those considered women's specialties—cooking, hairdressing, fashion design—have always been men?" Virginia Woolf, of course, has answered that question in *A Room of One's Own*, and others have answered it as well. That men have excelled is not because women are essentially inferior, which he was slyly implying, but that women have been denied the same opportunities as men. They have been kept out of the libraries and in the kitchen "barefoot and pregnant." So it was especially gratifying to me to discover that in this very specialized field, literature written in English by ethnic Chinese and Chinese Eurasians and published in the United States, the women not only outnumber the men but the women's books are more authentic, more numerous, quite simply—better.

It has been an exciting search, a rewarding project. And a difficult one. First, I did not have such common research tools as the card catalogue and the Library of Congress subject heading directory. In 1980, when I began my research, there was no listing for "Chinese American authors." At the Library of Congress, I asked why and was told no one had yet published a book on this subject, and if no book has been written the subject does not exist, as far as their directory is concerned. Under the heading "Asian American literature" I had better luck, for three anthologies had been published: *Asian American Authors* by Kai-yu Hsu (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), *Aiiieeeee!* by Frank Chin et al. (Washington, DC: Howard University Press,

1974), and *Asian American Heritage* by David Wand (New York: Washington Square, 1974). These pioneering collections gave me a start in identifying some authors. Wayne Miller's *Handbook of American Minorities* (New York: NYU Press, 1976) and Priscilla Oaks' *Minority Studies: An Annotated Bibliography* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1976) were also helpful. Elaine Kim's *Asian American Literature* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1982) was published after most of my basic research had been completed, but Professor Kim gave me some names I had not known. A colleague at Rutgers, Marjorie Li, told me about Lin Tai-yi; another colleague, Peter Li, introduced me to Eileen Chang; and one of the authors I interviewed, Diana Chang, lent me her copy of Chuang Hua's *Crossings*, which she had purchased for one dollar at a garage sale. For a while, I combed the National Union Catalogue and scoured the shelves of secondhand bookstores looking for Chinese surnames, which, fortunately, are not numerous, and in this antediluvian manner I discovered Hazel Lin and Janet Lim.

The next problem was obtaining the books. Those with copyrights as recent as five years were already out of print and most were not available in local libraries. It was further disturbing to discover that the books my university library did own, such as Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*, were shelved as sociology or, as in the case of Mai-mai Sze's *Echo of a Cry* or Winnifred Eaton's *A Japanese Blossom*, as juvenile books, mainly because they dealt with Asians or were illustrated and had children in them. Again, the very idea of Chinese American *literature* seemed nonexistent to the Library of Congress cataloguers who determine a volume's call number. The exception was the Wasson collection at Cornell University, which has nearly all of Winnifred Eaton's novels and from which I obtained many interlibrary loans. I was disappointed to find no listing for the "Asian American Woman's Experience" in the index to Patricia Addis' *Through a Woman's I, An Annotated Bibliography of American Women's Autobiographical Writings 1946–1976* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1983), though the index identifies "American Indian Women's Experience" and "Black Women's Experience" and though the bibliography itself includes at least five Asian American women writers.

However, the tide is turning. Not only are Asian American writers increasing in number but they are also gaining wider recognition, beginning in the early 1970s when Lawson Fusao Inada's *Before the War: Poems as They Happened* (1971) was published by William Morrow, a major New York press; and Frank Chin's two plays, *Chickencoop Chinaman* (1972) and *The Year of the Dragon* (1974), were produced at New York's American Place Theatre. In 1976, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* won the National Book Critics' Circle Award for the year's best work of nonfiction. Her second book, *China Men*, won the American Book Award in 1980. In 1981, the Obie Award for the Best New Play went to David Henry Hwang's

"*F.O.B.*" In 1982, Cathy Song won the Yale Series of Younger Poets competition with *Picture Bride*, published by Yale University Press in 1983. *Island, Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island 1910–1940*, edited by Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung, published in 1980, demonstrated that the literary impulse among Chinese in America has a tradition and a history. In 1982, Elaine Kim's *Asian American Literature*, the first book-length study of the field, proved that the body of work was large and significant enough to merit serious scholarly attention. In 1985, Genny Lim's play "Island" was aired on National Public Television. In 1987, Garrett Hongo's second book of poems, *The River of Heaven*, won the Lamont Poetry Prize of the Academy of American Poets. In 1988, David Henry Hwang's "M. Butterfly" won the Tony Award for Best New Dramatic Play on Broadway. In 1989, Carolyn Lau's book of poetry, *Wode Shuofa*, and Frank Chin's collection of stories, *The Chinaman Pacific and Frisco Railroad Co.*, won the American Book Awards from the Before Columbus Foundation. Our numbers are growing, our voices swelling. We are no longer a silent minority.

I have had several purposes in writing this book. My initial impulse, to uncover literary gems, I later abandoned, for axiology itself, the study of evaluation and value judgments, is now in dispute among literary theoreticians and critics, Barbara Herrnstein Smith and Jane Tompkins among them. Barbara Herrnstein Smith's finely reasoned essay, "Contingencies of Value," among other works, brought to the open the questionable but hitherto unquestioned systems of evaluation within the academy, among critics, reviewers, publishers, and librarians governing notions of "classic," canonical, or Great Literature. She calls into question the assumptions that "objectivity" governs the evaluator and that "universality" is a gauge of "quality."[3] Jane Tompkins, in reexamining *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, asks her reader "to set aside some familiar categories for evaluating fiction—stylistic intricacy, psychological subtlety, epistemological complexity." She wants us to see the texts she examines "not as an artifice of eternity answerable to certain formal criteria . . . but as a political enterprise . . . that both codifies and attempts to mold the values of its time."[4] Tompkins' request for suspension of the "familiar categories" for evaluating texts is particularly pertinent since these conventional criteria are not always applicable to the writers of my study. Without understanding the social and historical contexts of these authors' work, full comprehension and appreciation would not be possible, and judgment without full comprehension is useless.

And yet, so often the mistaken attitude prevails: if a writer falls into oblivion it must be because s/he was unworthy, and therefore fully deserving of oblivion, for surely, if a writer is "truly outstanding," this greatness cannot help but be apparent and "will stand the test of time," as cream rises to the top. But such an attitude does not take into consideration fluctuations of taste; personal idiosyncrasies and individual purposes; political and historical conditions; perspectives and proclivities of the scholars and critics who keep an author's work in the limelight and thus in the canon. That the canon has changed may be readily seen by perusing the table of contents of literary anthologies over an extended period.

Thus, fully aware of my personal interest in the subject and equally aware that this project had never before been undertaken, yet was worthy of the undertaking, I plunged in. Setting myself a narrow focus, I have attempted, nonetheless, to be as comprehensive as possible. This book, then, is an introduction, and a history, as well as my own readings of the full-length prose narratives (autobiographies, memoirs, fictionalized memoirs, and novels) written in English and published in the United States by women of Chinese or partial Chinese ancestry. I have arranged my material roughly in chronological and thematic order to give my readers a sense of the length and breadth of the tradition. The diversity of their themes has been great, yet all the writers have obviously been conscious of their difference in a white society, a society whose attitude towards them as "other" has fluctuated depending on political circumstances. How each author has reacted to this consciousness of difference, to the between-world condition, and to the political and social environment around her is my major unifying theme.

My purpose in writing this book has been to show off the flowers in my mother's garden. I want to put these writers on the scholarly map, to give them a heading in the Library of Congress Subject Catalogue, to validate their existence and their work, to retrieve them from oblivion. With this study, I hope that other women like me will not grow up without models, in ignorance of our own history. Among these writers and their books, I hope such readers will find a source of inspiration and of communal and personal pride. Women and readers from other bi- and multicultural backgrounds will understand much in this book, for the experience of marginalization and the need for self-affirmation is common to us all. And for those who are neither Chinese American, bicultural, or female, I know that the kind of curiosity, openness, and stretching that leads such readers to investigate the experience of the Other will bring its own reward.

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My father's question: "Why are men best in everything?" challenged me to prove him wrong. My mother's life as a Chinese child adopted by an unmarried American missionary nurse to China gave me the unifying theme. Without my husband, Gelston Hinds, Jr., whose love and unfailing belief in me and in this work took the form of oceans of babysitting and seas of pep talks, and without the understanding of my children, Arthur and Catherine, that Mommy at times had to work instead of play with them, this book would never have been launched. I thank them all for their assistance and encouragement in this project, but I must lay claim myself to the blemishes that still remain.

Chapter 1

Writing As Rebellion: Historical and Contextual Backgrounds

In many ways writing is the act of saying I, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying *listen to me, see it my way, change your mind.* It's an aggressive, even a hostile act.

—Joan Didion, "Why I Write"[1]

Ladies of the diplomatic corps do not write books. The set in which I lived considered writing an unwomanly occupation, destructive of one's moral character, like acting.

—Han Suyin, "Foreword" to *Destination Chungking*[2]

A woman without talent is a woman of virtue.
It is more profitable to raise geese than daughters.

—Traditional Chinese Proverbs

1. WOMEN IN CHINESE TRADITION AND HISTORY

For women of Chinese ancestry, perhaps even more than for Joan Didion, writing is not only an act of self-assertion but an act of defiance against the weight of historical and societal injunctions. Historically, the Chinese have assigned their women to an inferior and even expendable status, as exemplified in the two traditional Chinese proverbs cited above, in Han Suyin's remarks, and in the practices of footbinding, concubinage, female slavery, and female infanticide, to cite only a few examples. In the early dawn of history, as Julia Kristeva suggests in *About Chinese Women*, Chinese society may have been matrilineal, but by the first century B.C., using as evidence the ancient classic, *The Book of Songs*, whose datable poems range from 800

to 600 B.C., patriarchal power already had been long established and women were being trained from birth for an inferior place.

One poem from *The Book of Songs* presents the sharply contrasting receptions and expectations for male and female offspring beginning at birth. The poem begins with good wishes to the lord and then a description of the construction of a sturdy house for him. The lord sleeps in his house and dreams of black bears, brown bears, and of snakes, and the diviner interprets this dream:

> 'Black bears and brown
> Mean men-children.
>
> Snakes and serpents
> Mean girl-children.'
>
> So he bears a son,
> And puts him to sleep upon a bed,
> Clothes him in robes,
> Gives him a jade sceptre to play with.
> The child's howling is very lusty;
> In red greaves shall he flare,
> Be lord and king of house and home.
>
> Then he bears a daughter,
> And puts her upon the ground,
> Clothes her in swaddling-clothes,
> Gives her a loom-whorl to play with.
> For her no decorations, no emblems;
> Her only care, the wine and the food,
> And how to give no trouble to father and mother.[3]

The association of boys with the powerful bear and of girls with the slithery, lowly snake sets into immediate relief their relative values in the society as well as describing, metaphorically, what the author takes as their fundamental natures. The preferential treatment for the boy and the infinitely higher expectations for his lordly future compared to the humble treatment and low expectations for girls ensure that the latter will know and be conditioned from birth to their inferior place.

A second poem from *The Book of Songs*, part of a general lament, makes a very pointed complaint about adult female behavior:

> A clever man builds a city
> A clever woman lays one low;
> With all her qualifications, that clever woman
> Is but an ill-omened bird.
> A woman with a long tongue
> Is a flight of steps leading to calamity;
> For disorder does not come from heaven,
> But is brought about by women.
> Among those who cannot be trained or taught
> Are women and eunuchs.

Given the sexual discrimination advocated by the first poem, the second poem would be its natural outcome; if women could not be a respected part of the social structure, it was hardly in their interests to help maintain it, especially if such maintenance was at their own expense. One might well say that the second author was only reaping the fruits of the seeds sown by the first, for a child trained to believe herself inferior could well grow into a frustrated, destructive adult.

Confucius (551–479 B.C.) wrote very little about women, but his classification of women with slaves and small humans ("hsiao ren") so clearly revealed his attitude that he has been called an "eater of women."[4] About their education, he did write, "The aim of female education is perfect submission, not cultivation and development of the mind."[5] His well-regulated, hierarchical state depended on the maintenance of three principle bonds of loyalty and subordination, that of minister to prince, son to father, and wife to husband.[6] His followers in later periods were more explicit in their insistence on the inferiority and repression of women. Here are the words of Yang Chen (d. A.D. 124):

> If women are given work that requires contact with the outside, they will sow disorder and confusion throughout the Empire . . . The Book of Documents warns us against the hen who announces the dawn in place of the rooster . . . Women must not be allowed to participate in the affairs of the government.

and Han Shu:

> When a newborn baby comes into the world, if it's a boy as strong as a wolf, his parents are still afraid that he might be too weak; whereas if it's a girl as sweet and as gentle as a little mouse, her parents still fear she might be too strong.

and Sima Guang of the Sung Dynasty:

> Give a woman an education and all you will get from her is boredom and complaints.[7]

In the first century A.D., a code governing the behavior and training of women, called the Three Obediences and Four Virtues, was promulgated by imperial decree throughout China and remained continuously effective, helping to maintain patriarchal power, until the early twentieth century.[8] The Three Obediences enjoined a woman to obey her father before marriage, her husband after marriage, and her eldest son after her husband's death. The Four Virtues decreed that she be chaste; her conversation courteous and not gossipy; her deportment graceful but not extravagant; her leisure spent in perfecting needlework and tapestry for beautifying the home. The authorship of this oppressive code has been attributed to Ban Tso (A.D. 42?–A.D. 115?), a highly educated woman about whom we shall have more to say later.

Until the practice was forbidden by imperial edict in the eighteenth cen-

tury, Chinese wives were encouraged to commit suicide after their husbands' death. When a widow expressed such a desire, her family would construct a platform and invite family and friends to witness her hanging. Afterwards, the family would erect a stone arch to commemorate her heroism and to inspire other women to follow her example.[9] In 1661, when Ho Chien-min, the first Manchu emperor, died, more than 30 palace women were slain and buried with him.[10] Thus, China can boast more monuments to women than any other nation; however, the valorous acts commemorated by these monuments are not achievements in science, art, or politics but the act of suicide, for women were taught that "after their husbands died they had no right to live."[11]

And yet, though the subjugation of Chinese women has been oft proclaimed and compliant women much admired, some exceptions and rebels exist. One such exception is the elderly mother. As totally as the young woman is subjected to the will of men, so the older woman, specifically the mother of married sons, may in practice be the most powerful person in a multigenerational household. She has been described as "a complete autocrat, with almost final authority over her sons, daughters-in-law, servants, relatives, everybody except her husband, who is usually absent on his business. Her old age is a complete reversal of the restraint and discipline of her youth."[12]

Throughout China's 5,000-year history, only two exceptional women—Wu Chao (A.D. 624–705)[13] and Tzu Hsi (1835–1908)—managed to attain and, even more surprisingly, maintain the most powerful position in the land: Empress and sole ruler of China. Empress Wu ruled from 655 until her death and instituted a number of innovations, including the system of competitive examinations for civil servants, which remained in place for nearly 1,000 years, new guidelines for personal surnames, and changes in the administrative structure. She even invented 19 new written characters (Kristeva, 87). Tzu Hsi sat on China's golden dragon throne from 1875 until 1908, a time of great turmoil in China created in large part by military, political, and economic aggression from West European nations. The bravery of three legendary Chinese women of the Warring States period and the Han Dynasty is preserved in Kuo Mo-jo's play *The Three Rebellious Females*, and a woman's military prowess in "Magnolia Lay," the popular ballad that tells the story of Hua Mulan (420–588) (Kingston's woman warrior), who, disguised as a man, rode into battle in the place of her elderly father and fought for 12 years before returning home and resuming her woman's role.

In Chinese literature, women writers were few, but one poet stands far above the others: Li Qingzhao (1081–1141). Both classical and modern critics have placed her among the greatest Chinese writers, and Kristeva writes that she is "perhaps among the greatest, not only in China, but in the literature of the entire world" (90). Her poetry went through two phases. The

first, irregular in form and personal in subject matter, was characterized by a rare musicality and metaphors from the natural world to present psychological and emotional states. The poetry of her second phase, classical in form and public in subject, dealt with national themes of serious social concern.

And, finally, ironically, the woman credited with writing the oppressive code of Three Obediences and Four Virtues did not herself follow it. Ban Tso (A.D. 42?–115?), daughter of a prominent and scholarly general, was taught to read and write, accomplishments generally considered unnecessary for a girl. Married at an early age, she was almost immediately widowed, but instead of suicide, she chose to concentrate on her studies. The fame of her erudition reaching the emperor, she was invited to the palace to tutor the empress. There, she was elevated, even above male scholars, to the highest honor. When the emperor asked her to write a code of behavior for women, she produced a book called *Nujie*, "The Precepts for Women," which has been reduced to the Three Obediences and Four Virtues noted above. The following is a portion of her original text, in translation:

> In truth, as far as knowledge goes, a woman need not be extraordinarily intelligent. As for her speech, it need not be terribly clever. As for her appearance, it need not be beautiful or elegant; and as for her talents they need only be average . . . This is why the *Nuxian* says, "If a wife is like a shadow or an echo, how can you fail to praise her?" (Kristeva, 85)

Ban Tso's tone and negative phrasing softens the impact of the ideas she expresses. "A woman need not be extraordinarily intelligent" [to get by in this patriarchal society] is quite different from the Confucian edict that "the aim of female education is perfect submission." The popular reduction of her precepts into the positively stated Three Obediences and Four Virtues is thus not quite just to Ban Tso. Nonetheless, her ideas greatly pleased the emperor and the Code was decreed throughout the land. Ban Tso continued to be honored at court. When her father died, she took over the writing of the history of China that he had left unfinished, working in the imperial library until the history was completed. She died at the age of 70.[14]

Why a woman would write precepts that could be made so oppressive to women, and why, though educated herself, she did not overtly advocate education for other women, my primary source, Helena Kuo, could not answer, though she speculated on it. Kuo mused that perhaps the emperor was the actual author of the code, but to sugarcoat the pill he put a woman's name on it. Another possibility is that Ban Tso, heaped with honors from the highest male authorities in her life, identified with the patriarchy. Since she herself had always been the exception to the rule, never bound by the customs that bound other women, she merely wrote down what had been common practice for the ordinary woman. The code for women did not originate with her; she only recorded what she saw, what had already oc-

curred, for her great intellectual passion was history. Whatever the case, Ban Tso achieved personal distinction unusual to one of her sex even as she laid a heavy yoke on the shoulders of her sisters.

2. WINDS OF CHANGE

From the mid-nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century, China underwent a series of monumental revolutions that shook her very foundations and, with incredible speed, overturned centuries-old feudal structures. China's contact with the West—with Christian missionaries in large numbers, with modern technology and science, with democratic and egalitarian philosophies—was a catalyst for what some scholars regard as a 100-year revolution beginning with the Taiping Rebellion, carried forward by the establishment of a Republic in 1911–1912, led by western-educated Dr. Sun Yat-sen, and culminating in the Communist victory in 1949. The displacement of the emperor in 1911, the dissolution of his absolute authority at the state level, was accompanied by a displacement of patriarchal authority on the familial level. The Confucian bonds of loyalty and obligation broke their hold, for if a man no longer had to obey his emperor or prince, a woman no longer had to obey her man (or men). For traditionalists, these were earth-shattering reversals; for modernists, the changes meant exhilarating liberation. Furthermore, the overthrow of the emperor was not only a political act but an act of ethnic pride, for the emperor was a Manchu, and the majority of Chinese people are Hans. (The Chinese regard the entire Ch'ing Dynasty (1644–1911) as a government by foreigners.) Partly as a result of Christian missionary activity and partly because the time was ripe for change, Chinese girls began to be educated outside the home and these educated women became teachers and journalists, soldiers and revolutionaries. The liberating winds of revolution and patriotism, combined with the persistent tradition of the woman rebel and warrior, inspired Chinese women of this period to go so far as to become anarchists and assassins. Women participated in the struggle to overthrow the Ch'ing Dynasty by serving in the Women's National Army, the Women's Dare-to-Die Corps, and the Women's Assassination Corps. After the establishment of the Republic in 1911, women could then turn to the solution of their own problems, and women armies became transformed into women's suffrage societies.

In 1912, representatives from various women's groups from 18 provinces met in Nanking to organize an overall coordinating body and to draft a petition to present to the First National Legislature, then about to convene to draft a constitution. The petition urged equal rights for men and women, university education for women, and reform in family customs, namely, monogamy, prohibition of commerce in women, and freely contracted marriages. However, when the Legislature's Provisional Constitution was made

public on May 11, 1912, it did not include a clause guaranteeing sexual equality. The women then resubmitted the petition to the new president, Dr. Sun Yat-sen. Though sympathetic, Dr. Sun was unable to change the constitution. The women then reacted with passion: they "burst into an uproarous demonstration before the legislators." Overnight they recruited supporters and "the next day stormed the Legislature, smashing windows and trampling the military guard." According to historian Roxane Witke, this "outbreak of female violence rocked the entire nation, to say nothing of the foreign ministries . . . shaken by oriental shades of the Parliament-storming London Suffragettes."[15] Kristeva, too, was surprised by this impassioned behavior, and her tone betrays a certain condescension: "The eyes of China—and of the West as well—open wide in astonishment: no one would have expected this of Oriental suffragettes. Now their rage has made them exist in the eyes of the world. Their example is followed throughout the country and similar petitions are brought before the legislative bodies of several provinces, beginning with Jiangsu."[16]

Some concessions were obtained. In the southern province of Guangdung (Canton), women secured a limited franchise and began to build support by electing women representatives to the legislative assembly. But when Sun Yat-sen resigned from the presidency and strongman Yuan Shih-kai tried to reestablish an imperial form of government, women again joined the army, resorting once more to military means to achieve political power. Astutely, they adjusted their methods to match the methods of those in power.

Throughout the era of the liberal May Fourth Movement, from 1917–1921, Chinese feminism again crested in a second wave. In 1919, women students were admitted for the first time to the University of Beijing, and women's rights organizations swelled in numbers, often with men members in the majority; for example, men made up the membership of two-thirds of the Beijing Alliance for Women's Rights.

In 1919, the young Mao Tse-tung added his voice to the struggle for women's rights. Mao, then editor of the *Hsiang River Review*, a radical publication, wrote a series of articles denouncing the Confucian traditions that led to the suicide of a Miss Chao Feng-lin, who chose to slit her throat in her bridal chair enroute to the home of the groom rather than to marry the man selected by her parents. Though Miss Chao's situation and her solution were commonplace, Mao used her case to raise the consciousness of the public to the wrong done the young woman. Mao himself, at age 13, had fought against an arranged marriage by threatening suicide and finally running away from home before his Confucian father relented. Directly countering Confucius' classification of women as "hsiao ren" (inferior or small human beings), Mao called women "ren" (human beings): "As we are all human beings, why not grant us all suffrage? And as we are all human beings, why not allow us to mix freely with one another?"[17] Today, these remarks

seem nothing more than common sense, but in China in 1919 they were revolutionary ideas that threatened the status quo, and Mao's journal was suppressed by a Hunan warlord after only five issues. Again using logic and common sense, Mao boldly attacked the patriarchal requirement of female chastity in words that today still have a radical ring even in the "enlightened West": "What sort of chastity is this, completely confined to women with shrines for female martyrs everywhere? Where are the shrines for chaste boys?" (Witke, 14). For Mao, oppressive society was evil, the individual victim good; instead of killing herself, Miss Chao should have struggled against parental tyranny and worked to reform society.

In 1920, Chinese women sent a delegation to the International Council of Suffragettes in Switzerland; in 1921, the Hunan Women's Alliance secured for women in Hunan the right to vote and be elected to office. In 1934, the Chinese Communist Party advocated marriage reforms, including what is today still a radical clause: the elimination of the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate children. And in 1951, the Congress of the Peoples' Republic of China passed a marriage law whose first article is a model of equity:

> The arbitrary and compulsory feudal marriage system, which is based on the superiority of men over women, and which ignores the interests of children, is abolished. The "New Democratic Marriage System," based on free choice of partners, on monogamy, on equal rights for both sexes and on protection of the lawful interests of women and children, shall be put into effect. (Kristeva, 130)

This 1951 Marriage Law provides for the following rights:

1. A woman may retain her maiden name after marriage;
2. Her children may take her name rather than her husband's;
3. A man cannot apply for divorce during his wife's pregnancy and then not until the child is one year old;
4. A woman may apply for divorce at any time;
5. Divorce is granted immediately when both parties consent;
6. After divorce, the mother has custody of a nursing child; if the father protests, a decision is made in the best interest of the child;
7. The wife's work in the home is equal to the husband's work outside;
8. The wife is entitled to an equal share of the family property.

But despite the high promises of this legal document, a gap remains between the law and actual practices in Communist China. Apart from the women married to prominent leaders, like Chiang Ching (Mao's third wife) and Deng Ying-chao (wife of Chou En-lai), few women have independently achieved positions of real power and influence. The most notable woman revolutionary of the 1920s, Xiang Jingyu, first head of the Women's Department, was executed by the Kuomintang in 1928. A modern-day Hua Mulan,

Kuo Chung-jing, disguised herself as a man and fought in the Peoples' Liberation Army; she rose in the ranks and was given the army's highest award, "distinguished serviceman." When wounded, her sex was discovered in the army hospital, and her explanation was that she had hidden her sex to be able to fight at the front. Upon recovery, she was assigned to a more appropriate post in the army's public health section, with other women.[18]

Soong Ching-ling (Madame Sun Yat-sen), a staunch supporter of the Communist government, in an article for the *Peking Review* (February 11, 1972), admitted that women's liberation in China still had much to accomplish:

> If we ask, however, whether the Women's Liberation Movement in China has come to its end, the answer is definitely no.
>
> It is true that the landlord system has been abolished for nearly twenty years, but much of the feudal patriarchal ideology still prevails among the peasants, or rather, farmers. This ideology still does yield mischievous things in the rural places and some of the small towns. Only when the feudal and patriarchal ideology is eradicated can we expect sexual equality to be fully established.[19]

Though China may have taken great leaps forward in official statutes and public pronouncements concerning women, nonetheless, in practice, backed by centuries of history and tradition, the old ways die hard. Moreover, Chinese who have immigrated to other countries, whether motivated by homesickness, alienation, or persecution, often hold tightly to what they have brought from the Old Country; thus, customs and attitudes that may have altered or disappeared in the mother country may still be continued almost unchanged in isolated enclaves abroad. And young Chinese women today—even (or perhaps particularly) those living half a globe away from China—are still haunted by the misogynist proverbs and attitudes of generations past.

3. CHINESE WOMEN IN AMERICA

Initially, Chinese women in America were a rarity; in fact, they were such an exotic curiosity that money could be made by simply putting them on display. Afong Moy was one of these "displays" and was reportedly the first Chinese woman to come to America. She "caused a sensation in New York" in 1834 by just sitting "amidst the exotic Chinese trappings in vogue at that time."[20] She was followed by others, most notably Pwan-Yekoo, age 17, whom Barnum's touring Chinese Museum billed as "the Chinese belle, with her Chinese suite of attendants, [who] is drawing all Broadway to the Chinese collection. She is so pretty, so arch, so lively, and so graceful, while her minute feet (2½ inches) are wondrous!" (Yung, 17).

In contrast to this effusive and sensationalist praise, the author of a later article in *Harper's Weekly* January 30, 1858, had quite the opposite view of

Chinese women: "I defy any but the most catholic women-worshippers to admire the women of Southern China. The taste for the baboon-like faces of Hong Kong women is, I fancy, like that for mangoes, an acquired one. I have learned to like mangoes; but my tailor's wife [who is Chinese] still excites in me only unmitigated disgust" (Yung, 17).

Apparently, in judging Chinese women, Americans were divided into two extreme camps: one cloyingly sweet, the other overly sour—both unrealistic and based on fixed concepts within the perceiver's head.

When Chinese men traveled to the States—first enticed by the discovery of gold in California in the 1850s, by western railroad construction bosses desperate for manpower in the 1860s, and by sugar planters in Hawaii from 1851–1884—they customarily left their women at home because marriage before departure was thought to ensure the traveler's return; furthermore, the wife's place was to serve her parents-in-law, and the journey was believed to be too dangerous for women. But there were two nonconformists who braved the journey and became the first Chinese women to immigrate to the United States; they present an interesting contrast, for one was a domestic servant, the other a prostitute.

The first Chinese woman immigrant was Marie Seise, who debarked in San Francisco from the *Eagle* in February 1848 with the Charles V. Gillespie household. She was one of three Chinese servants; the other two were men. At an early age, she had run away from home in Guangzhou (Canton) to avoid being sold by her family as a slave. She found work for a Portuguese family in Macao, and adopted their dress and their Roman Catholic religion. Later, she married a Portuguese sailor, who abandoned her shortly thereafter. She then found a position with an American family, who, in 1837, took her to what were then called the Sandwich Islands, now Hawaii. Six years later, she returned to China, and in 1848 recrossed the Pacific with the Gillespie family to settle in San Francisco. Her story may be found at the Trinity Episcopal Church in the records of Bishop Ingraham, who baptized her in 1854.[21]

The second Chinese woman to immigrate to the United States was Ah Choi, who arrived in San Francisco late in 1848 or early 1849. She was a prostitute, a free agent, and not only popular but enterprising. Within two years of her arrival, she was the owner of a brothel. She charged one ounce of gold (then $16) per visit and had a flourishing business.[22]

These first two Chinese women to immigrate to the United States—the servant and the prostitute—neatly fit the stereotypes of the Chinese, or Asian, woman (for distinctions among Asians by Caucasians are rare), that are widely held in the West. To stereotype, G. W. Allport in his classic study *The Nature of Prejudice* tells us, is to place a newly encountered entity into a preestablished category to save oneself the effort and time in getting to know this entity and in having to think about it. To stereotype is to shortcut thought,

an economy measure we all take. However, not to allow facts to change the stereotypes we hold is to be prejudiced. Two main stereotypes persist for the Asian woman in America; they are polar extremes, roughly parallel to the whore/madonna or to the "mad woman in the attic"/"angel in the house" dichotomies for white women. At one end of the spectrum is the Dragon Lady, a female counterpart to the diabolical Fu Manchu. With her talon-like six-inch fingernails, her skin-tight satin dress slit to the thigh, she can poison a man as easily as she seductively smiles and puffs on her foot-long cigarette holder. An "Oriental" Circe, she is as desirable as she is dangerous. At the opposite end of the spectrum is the Shy Lotus Blossom or China Doll: demure, diminutive, and deferential. She is modest, tittering behind her delicate ivory hand, eyes downcast, always walking 10 steps behind her man, and, best of all, devoted body and soul to serving him.

Like all stereotypes, these contain a kernel of truth, though Japanese and Chinese cultural traits are jumbled together. The kernel is generally a visible trait—long fingernails, slit dress, smiling behind one's hand. However, these visible cultural signs have been misread. In nineteenth-century China, long fingernails were indeed the fashion, affected by the empress and ladies of high station and considered marks of beauty. As winter tans are coveted in the Western world today because they signify that one can afford to take expensive vacations in warm southern climes while everyone else is confined indoors by the winter cold, so long fingernails in nineteenth-century China indicated that one could afford to hire other peoples' hands and not need to use one's own. In reality, long fingernails, then, were no more a weapon than tans, now, indicate negroid blood. In fact, special jeweled cases were created to protect such nails because, as anyone who has tried to grow long nails knows, they break easily.

The deference to men, the modesty and shyness of the "lotus blossom," are indeed traits historically inculcated in Asian women from girlhood, as we have seen in the historical overview above and particularly persistent among traditionally reared Japanese women even today. However, laughing behind one's hands is not a sign of modesty but of politeness, akin to the Western custom of covering the mouth when coughing or sneezing. In polite society, teeth are not to be displayed; Chinese men, as well as women, still use toothpicks under cover of their hands.

Allport has stated that stereotypes are self-reflexive, telling us more about the person holding the stereotype than the one being stereotyped: "Whether favorable or unfavorable, a stereotype is an exaggerated belief associated with a category. Its function is to justify (rationalize) our conduct in relation to that category."[23] Though little research has been done on the origin of these particular stereotypes, negative images of the Chinese were sent home by Western missionaries attempting to gain support for their "civilizing" cause. However, both the dragon lady and lotus blossom stereotypes have a strongly

sexual component and would seem to point to an origin suggesting a greater intimacy. Using Allport's theory to hypothesize on the particular "self-reflexive" circumstances that spawned the "dragon lady" and "lotus blossom," we may imagine that these two stereotypes were created by Western sailors or soldiers of fortune who had sexual contacts with Chinese women in the early days of trade between Asia and Europe. The dragon lady stereotype may have been the result of a sailor's mishap with an experienced prostitute who robbed him of his entire voyage's wages. His own drunken stupidity and guilt became transferred to her treachery and wiles; therefore, she became the tawny deceiver, he the lily-white victim. The lotus blossom perhaps stemmed from an affair with a docile, even a virginal girl, whom the sailor/soldier seduced and then abandoned, à la Madame Butterfly. With time and distance, her image took on an idealized, romantic aura—particularly if she killed herself. Ah, she was everything a man could desire, but, alas, she had an Asian face, spoke no English, and could never be taken home to mother.

Whatever their origin, these stereotypes were disseminated and perpetuated through the popular media and continue to distort the way in which Asian women are portrayed and perceived in the Western world. In the 1960s, Madame Nhu, the First Lady of Vietnam, was labeled a "Dragon Lady" by the press,[24] and the "classic" dragon lady reemerged in 1985 in Nicholas Meyer's film, "Volunteers," a parody of Peace Corps volunteers and the undefined Asian people who hosted them. The 1950s films, "Teahouse of the August Moon" and "The World of Suzy Wong," combined the dragon lady and shy lotus blossom into a third variant: the prostitute with the heart of a child. As a result of these stereotypes then, Asian women, when powerful, are seen as dangerous and treacherous; and when powerless, as sexual objects and submissive servants not to be taken seriously. The stereotypes continue to serve as blinders for dominant Americans and to stand as barriers to the fullest acceptance and development of Asian American women.

Examples that belie stereotypes are considered aberrations and quickly forgotten. One of these was Sieh King King, the first voice for Chinese women's emancipation in the United States. Sieh King King (Xue Jinqin) was a 16-year-old foreign student at the University of California, called by a Chinese editor "the Joan of Arc of her people," whose impassioned speech delivered on November 2, 1902, before a theatre full of men and women, as reported in the *San Francisco Chronicle* the day after, "boldly condemned the slave girl system, raged at the horrors of foot-binding, and with all the vehemence of aroused youth, declared that men and women were equal and should enjoy the privileges of equals."[25] Later that evening, undoubtedly as a result of the new ideas she had expressed, women were allowed for the first time to sit down at the same tables as men at a banquet in her honor. Sieh King King's father was an enlightened Tienjing merchant who had hired

foreign teachers for his daughter and had imbued her with progressive ideals. A year later, according to historian Judy Yung, she gave another "eloquent and inspiring speech" to an audience of 200 women and again "expounded on the role of Chinese women and the need to abolish outdated Chinese customs." The revolutionary feminist ideas Sieh King King had expressed became a general concern in the Chinese community in America and, as Yung put it, "what she advocated on behalf of Chinese women—unbound feet, equal rights, education, and public participation—remained at the heart of social change for Chinese women for the next three decades."[26]

A foreign student, Sieh King King most likely did not remain in the United States, for the local newspapers did not report on her activities after 1903. Furthermore, the number of immigrant women from China to the United States was extremely small until the mid-twentieth century. In 1852, for example, of the 11,794 Chinese in California only 7 were women. By the 1880s, the ratio of Chinese women to men in the United States was still no greater than 1 to 20.[27] From the late nineteenth century until the middle of the twentieth, harsh laws severely limited the immigration of Chinese, particularly Chinese women. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act, renewed until 1943, prohibited entry into the United States for all Chinese except diplomats, merchants, tourists, teachers, and students. In 1924, Congress passed a special law whose effect was to prohibit all immigration of Chinese women, including wives of American-born Chinese, ostensibly to reduce the number of prostitutes, but actually to prevent proliferation of an undesirable alien race. From 1924 to 1930, when this act was revised, no Chinese women were admitted into the United States.[28] Only after 1943 could Chinese women immigrate more freely, and only after 1954 did their numbers in the United States reach parity with Chinese men.

The majority of Chinese women immigrants to the United States in the late nineteenth century were working class with neither the education nor the leisure to write books; their lives were engulfed by the duties of childbearing, childcare, and the business of earning a living. Contemporary authors have researched and recreated the daily life of these pioneers. Monfoon Leong's unfinished novel *Precious Jade*,[29] for example, vividly recreates the life of a nineteenth-century Chinese woman in the western United States, whose youth and energies are sapped by the grinding work of her husband's small hand laundry. Ruthann Lum McCunn's *Thousand Pieces of Gold*[30] is a fictionalized biography of the eventful life of Lalu Nathoy, or Polly Bemis, who as a young woman in 1872 was sold naked on the block in San Francisco to a saloon keeper from Oregon and who ended her life as a respected homesteader on the Salmon River (the River of No Return) in Idaho. Her life bore certain general similarities to that of Negro slave women, but she had neither the time nor the inclination for writing her own story as did ex-slaves Harriet Wilson and Harriet Jacobs. Lalu Nathoy's story remained untold until nearly

100 years later, when McCunn, a former librarian who is herself one-quarter Chinese, researched and reconstructed it.

Thus, through cultural and historical circumstances, the majority of authors in this study are not only foreign-born but also upper- or upper-middle class in background. Because of the immigration restrictions, many come from families in diplomatic circles, often Christian families, who educated daughters as well as sons in Western cultures and languages. The majority are first-generation immigrant women. Some, such as Edith Eaton, Mai-mai Sze, Chuang Hua, and Bette Bao Lord, immigrated as children. Others (Helena Kuo, Hazel Lin, Eileen Chang, Yuan-tsung Chen) immigrated as young adults. One (Han Suyin) maintains a residence in New York where she spends three or four months a year and the rest of the time in other parts of the world. Another (Lin Tai-yi) lived many years in the United States then lived in Hong Kong, but she continued to write in English and has recently returned to the United States. Only 5 (Jade Snow Wong, Virginia Lee, Diana Chang, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Amy Tan) of the 18 authors in this study were born in the United States. One (Winnifred Eaton) was born in Montreal.

Though some readers may consider this group unrepresentative of Chinese Americans or overly narrow in its perspective because of the preponderance of émigrés, we must remember that since racial characteristics have an immediate visual impact, race has always played a more significant role in the lives of minorities in white America than has class. Thus, the experience of an upper-class Chinese émigré in white America is closer to that of a working-class American-born Chinese American than to that of any white person. And, thus, Mai-mai Sze, daughter of Ambassador Alfred Sze, could say to an African American woman whom she had seen snubbed at a lunch counter in Wellesley, Massachusetts, in the 1940s, "We're cause people, whether we like it or not."[31]

In addition to the difficulty of writing in a second language, another handicap peculiar to women in the upper- or upper-middle class, despite their Western education, was social constraint, as expressed by Han Suyin in the foreword to *Destination Chungking;* writing was frowned upon as an activity lacking in respectability. Modesty and reticence were the ideals established for women; writing was extreme egotism, even self-exposure. Therefore, in order for a Chinese immigrant woman to write and publish a book in English, she must be something of a rebel, for writing, an act of rebellion and self-assertion, runs counter to Confucian training. Also she has to possess two basic character traits: an indomitable will and an unshakeable self-confidence. She must also be propelled by the undeniable drive to communicate with the readers and speakers of the dominant language of the society into which she has been transplanted either because of the rightness of her cause or because of the force of her need to express herself.

In addition to nationality or ethnicity, one's sex is a third factor significant

to the experience of immigrant and minority groups in the United States. The women of a minority group, whether Asian, African, Indian, or Hispanic, have received a different treatment at the hands of the white majority than have the men of their race, and for this reason their writing, their record of their particular experiences, thoughts, and feelings are separate from those of the men of their ethnic group. Though their men may feel, with resentment, that "the dyad of Asian Woman and Western male [is] . . . the essence of any relationship between East and West,"[32] and though physical beauty may, in individual cases, seem to offset certain liabilities of race, beauty itself is short-lived, and the notice or status gained by it momentary and borrowed. Without doubt, the female sex itself is a liability in any patriarchy, and the ethnic minority female is triply vulnerable: as Chinese in an Euro-American world, as a woman in a Chinese man's world, as a Chinese woman in a white man's world. How these women writers responded to their between-world position and how they manifested this response in their writing will be the subject of this study. And not only do their texts tell us something about individual women of Chinese ancestry, but, as responses to living in the United States, they tell us something about Americans as well, reflecting a portion of American cultural history.

When comparing books written by men of Chinese ancestry and those written by women, I discovered three startling facts: first, women writers have been more numerous; second, women have written more books; and third, women's books have been more authentic, meaning that fewer women have fallen into what I call the alien observer trap. The Chinese as alien observer may be traced back to Oliver Goldsmith's "Letters from a Citizen of the World" (1762), which purported to be written by "Lien Chi Altangi," a Chinese traveler to England; these letters derived their humor and charm from the unexpected and unfamiliar angle of vision given to things familiar to the readers themselves. Since then, Chinese have been asked so often to write their impressions of life in the West that we may call this form a subgenre.

The rationale behind this subgenre is simple: everyone knows that the Chinese come from the other side of the globe and thus do many things in an upside down sort of way—for example, reading books from the back cover to the front, from the right to the left, and up and down on a page; beginning their dinners with a sweet and ending with soup—thus, one can assume that their initial reactions to unfamiliar customs they encounter in the West cannot help but be amusing to the Western reader. The popularity of the series of more than one dozen books published by painter/writer Chiang Yee, from *The Silent Traveler in Lakeland,* (1937) to *The Silent Traveler in San Francisco* (1964), may be attributed in part to this appeal. (Since the Chinese have lost a modicum of their strangeness, the most recent manifestation of the alien observer is now the extraterrestrial, as seen in such television shows