

**MODEL MINORITY MOTHERING:  
BICULTURALISM IN ACTION**

A Thesis

by

CHRISTINA ANNE ASHIE

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2008

Major Subject: Comparative Literature and Culture

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Approved by:

Chair of Committee,	Claudia Nelson
Committee Members,	Pamela Matthews
	José Villalobos
Head of Department,	Melanie Hawthorne

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## ABSTRACT

Model Minority Mothering: Biculturalism in Action. (May 2008)

Christina Anne Ashie, B.A., Texas A&M University

Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Claudia Nelson

This thesis traces the immigration of “model minority” mothers: Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, from their home countries to the United States. It examines the reasons women immigrate to the United States, the situations into which they immigrate, and the ways that they adapt traditional East Asian modes of mothering and child rearing techniques to life in the United States. This thesis finds that Chinese, Japanese, and Korean women emigrate to the United States primarily under the direction of male figures of authority. Motivators of their emigration include leaving poverty and war in their own countries, joining husbands or potential husbands in the United States, hoping to escape the cultural restrictions of their home countries, or becoming prostitutes. As these women make their own way in the United States, they find themselves encountering immense cultural difficulties, not the least of which is the alteration of their role as mothers as they try to raise their children in an entirely new cultural context. Despite the hopes of many of these women, what they find in the United States is not a life of leisure and wealth; rather, they are forced into positions in which they must work for long hours outside the home to provide economically for their families as well as raise their children and care for the home. This thesis finds that memoirs, novels,

biographies, autobiographies, narratives, historical accounts, and sociological data highlight several major areas of adaptation for these women including: the differences in these women's sense of community in America, their expectations of the educational system in the United States, the reversal of power in the use of language between mother and daughter, and the complex measures of adaptation to and rejection of U.S. cultural norms that mothers must implement while raising their children. Rather than being crushed by the labor that they must perform and the cultural adaptations that they must make, these women willingly sacrifice their lives to build a base upon which their children can succeed through the attainment of higher education leading toward upward mobility.

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to the Women's Studies department at Texas A&M University. Thank you for your support throughout my graduate work at Texas A&M. The opportunities you have given me have allowed me to attend a national conference and to write a well-developed thesis. I will carry the knowledge I have gained from women's studies courses with me as I continue my work.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The premise of this thesis has long been a source of consideration for myself. Professors, my husband, parents, and friends have been engaging in conversations with me, recommending texts and activities to me, and reading my work for a few years now. At this time, I would like to thank Dr. Pamela Matthews for formally introducing me to Asian American literature. You saw me through my undergraduate thesis and you have stuck with me for my Master's thesis. Thank you. I must also thank Dr. Claudia Nelson whose thorough and detailed comments kept me focused on the topic at hand while causing me to consider the many literary and theoretical perspectives surrounding my interdisciplinary work. This thesis would not be without your advice. Dr. José Villalobos has also been invaluable in helping this thesis grow. With his advice, I hope to perform a similar examination of Cuban mothers in the United States.

The Women's Studies Department at Texas A&M University has generously provided funding for this thesis. Thank you.

As well, I thank my husband whose unflagging support and encouragement has seen me through many frustrations as well as successes. Despite your many stresses and tasks, you have always encouraged me to push forward. Your love is faithful, kind, generous, and unselfish. I love you.

I also wish to thank my parents for the support that they have always given me and continue to give to me. I still remember when I decided to switch from Pre-med to English Literature and you said, "Well, I was waiting for that shoe to drop! What took you so long?" I love you both; you are wonderful examples.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION, LITERATURE REVIEW, AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### INTRODUCTION

Dominant American culture has long identified certain individuals as “model minorities” or groups that seem to have attained secure social status, high education levels, financial success, and easy assimilation into American ways of living. Notable among these groups are the East Asian immigrants of the last 75 years: Chinese, Japanese, and Korean.<sup>1</sup> Within these groups, scholars and readers often encounter strong and vibrant women who have immigrated with their families or alone to the United States to maximize educational and financial possibilities for themselves or their children (Chan 110). In essence, this thesis is dedicated to three avenues of exploration: the reasons East Asian women immigrate to the United States, the conditions into which they immigrate, and the differences between the culturally traditional methods of child-rearing in East Asia and the methods these mothers employ as they raise their children in the United States. The intent of this thesis is to use genres of immigrant literature including memoirs, novels, biographies, and autobiographies to perform these

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This thesis follows the format of the MLA Style Manual.

<sup>1</sup> The achievements of Asian immigrants and the idea of the model minority have been touted by Ronald Reagan, NBC, CBS, U.S. News & World Report, Time, Newsweek, Fortune and New Republic, to name just a few (Takaki 474).

evaluations. I have chosen to evaluate “model minority mothers” because it is commonly<sup>2</sup> assumed that these ethnic groups have, as a whole, successfully negotiated the cultural differences between their country of origin and the U.S. to the extent that they are considered to be financially prosperous, hard-working, and enviably intelligent.

Before I continue to discuss the purpose of this thesis, I must first address the complications surrounding the term “model minority.” This term or classification is highly problematic because it is used to generalize and patronize Asian immigrants as well as to insult many other ethnicities of immigrants, particularly Latinos and African Americans. The term “model minority” creates a double-bind for the Asian minority groups assigned that classification. While Asian immigrants as a whole do earn statistically more per household than other minority groups, despite their hard work they have not been allowed to attain the “American Dream” (Wu 31). Sociological data suggest that Asian families have a higher mean income because they have more members of their families contributing to the overall family income than native-born whites and because they are clustered in areas where the cost of living is higher than the national average, such as New York State and California (Takaki 475). In addition, Asian immigrants are consistently overqualified and underpaid for the positions they hold (Takaki 476). It is also true that Chinese, Japanese, and Korean immigrants are more likely than immigrants of other ethnicities to own and run a small business such as a restaurant or laundry. However, Frank H. Wu, author of Yellow: Race in America

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<sup>2</sup> For a clear, careful and informative analysis of this situation, see Chapters 11-13 of Ronald Takaki’s A History of Asian Americans: Strangers from a Different Shore.

Beyond Black and White, suggests that the reason more Asian immigrants are able to start up successful businesses, rather than being laborers, is that they are able to borrow and lend money within their community (31).

The concept of the “model minority,” while ostensibly benign, even complimentary, creates a sense of competition between Asian immigrants and Latinos and African Americans. In fact, Chinese laborers were brought to the United States after the Civil War in order to undercut the demand for black freedmen (Wu 60). The governor of Arkansas during the Reconstruction Period explained, “Undoubtedly the underlying motive for this effort...was to punish the Negro for having abandoned control of his old master, and to regulate the conditions of his employment and the scale of wages to be paid him” (qtd. in Wu 60). In the 1860s through 1880s, Chinese immigrants were hired to replace striking Irish workers. One historian of the time, Stuart Miller, claimed that Chinese men were better workers than the Irish for U.S. society because they “did not drink whiskey, stab one another, or beat their wives” (qtd. in Wu 61). As a result of their replacement of African Americans and Irish Americans in the workplace, anti-Asian sentiment became violent in the 1870s and has continued to erupt into violence in the present day, from riots against Asian small business owners (Wu 70-73) to college graffiti criticizing the number and degree of success of Asian students on campus (Takaki 479) to racially motivated murders such as the 1982 murder of Vincent Chin, a young Chinese American, who was beaten to death outside of a bar in Detroit by two white men who had lost their jobs (Takaki 481-483).

While white Americans and the media portray Asian American accomplishments with admiration, the results of this portrayal are also generally negative. First, Asian Americans are disregarded and declassified as minorities (Wu 21). Not only does this disqualify them from specific loans and government programs, it also makes the needs of their culture “virtually invisible in serious discourse” (Wu 26). Thus, Asian Americans are caught between black and white.<sup>3</sup> Neither one nor the other, their rights and identity are ignored by the government as well as by activist organizations (Okihiro 32-34). Second, the increase of Asian American representation in Ivy League and upper echelon universities has led to reverse discrimination, in which universities limit the number of Asians they admit to degree programs (Takaki 478). Moreover, white students avoid taking classes with a significant number of Asian students for fear that they will not be able to compete with the scholarship of the Asian students (Takaki 479). Gary Okihiro, author of Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture, considers the concept of the “model minority” a new version of the “yellow peril.” Joann Faung Jean Lee’s book Asian Americans records the thoughts of C. Ng, a Chinese-American, on living and working in the United States. He asserts,

After the Communists took over [China], there was still nothing to do, to make a living...It was better to be an ant in those days than to be a human being...I like living in the United States. The living conditions –

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<sup>3</sup> A poignant example of the liminal racial position of Asian immigrants is furnished by Sam Sue in Joann Faung Jean Lee’s book Asian Americans. He explains, “There is this shot in the opening scene of the movie, *Mississippi Burning*, [a 1988 film] where you see two water fountains. One is broken, and chipped, and water is dripping from it. The other is modern, and shining. A white guy goes up to the nice one, and the black kid goes up to the old one. I remember saying to myself, ‘If I was in that scene, where would I drink?’” (Lee 3). Indeed, this does become a problem for Sue at the movie theater; is he supposed to sit upstairs with the blacks or downstairs with the whites?

where you live, how you live – are far better in this country...If you want to work, you can even take two jobs. Because I was persecuted under the Communists, I don't care how hard a job is, I will do it, and be grateful to have it. An average person who is straight and hardworking will definitely do well in this country. The only people who don't have money are those who gamble, drink, are lazy, or are afraid of hard work. ("Growing Old" 147)

Confronted by this powerful devotion to work and upward mobility, white Americans now fear the onslaught of Asian mental ability and dedication to work rather than fearing another physical and violent Japanese invasion (Okiihiro 141-147).

With the obvious inaccuracy and detrimental ramifications of the term and the theory of the model minority, why have I decided to use this term at all in my research? I have chosen to discuss model minority groups, recognizing the complications of this issue, but also recognizing the prevalence of this concept and this perception among North Americans. The most readily available research concerning the place of women, motherhood, and immigration is about the Asian minority groups that have been in the United States for the longest amount of time and in the highest numbers. Those nationalities include Chinese, Japanese, and Korean immigrants. Coincidentally, these groups are also labeled as model minorities. Moreover, as sociologists and historians admit, there is some truth to the success and acculturation of these groups. As the focus of this thesis is to examine the reasons Asian women immigrate to the United States and to examine through literary research the ways they negotiate their mothering within the

culture of the United States, I must explore avenues that provide enough research to complete a thoughtful analysis of these questions. Chinese, Japanese, and Korean immigrants have acculturated to some degree; if they had not, they would not be as financially successful, or as thoroughly studied. While it is certainly not my intent to perpetuate the myth of the model minority, it has intersected with my research; thus, I feel it must be acknowledged and qualified.

As such, it is the goal of this thesis to discuss literary texts through a sociological framework in order to examine the difficulties and cultural conflicts these immigrant “model minority” women encounter as they try to raise their children within a new cultural context. This thesis is particularly concerned with the journey of immigrant women and mothers, with an emphasis on the way motherhood adapts to work within a new cultural framework. It examines issues that force an additional burden upon immigrant women as well as problems that both immigrant men and women must address, with its focus tightly on the role and conditions of women.

According to prominent sociologists, including Marc H. Bornstein, evaluation of acculturation within immigrant groups is still in its preliminary stages of development (4-6). Examination of the role of cross-cultural mothering through interdisciplinary research is even scarcer. With this in mind, this thesis examines, specifically, the differences in these women’s sense of community in America, their expectations of the educational system in the United States, the reversal of power – from mother instructing child to child teaching mother – in the use of language, and finally the complex measures of adaptation to and rejection of U.S. cultural norms that mothers must

implement while raising their children. While I consult sociological, anthropological, and historical data to review reasons for immigration and child rearing practices in East Asia as well as child rearing problems in the United States, I also consult fiction, biographies, and memoirs written by Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Americans about immigrant experiences in the United States to complement my observations about the complexity of adapting to and raising a child in a new and different cultural context. In order to address the many aspects of immigration and motherhood at hand, I will first present sociological data concerning an aspect of traditional East Asian methods of mothering. Then, I will provide an example of that same situation, such as expectations about academic performance, through an anecdote concerning an Asian immigrant's mothering in the United States from a novel, memoir, or biographical account by an Asian or Asian American woman. This organization lends itself to the direct comparison between traditional and bicultural mothering that this thesis is seeking to make.

The sociological data will provide a solid basis for evaluating and considering literary texts. Many scholars consider memoirs to be transparent, entirely mimetic representations of individuals' lives rather than works of literary value or merit. Indeed, the purpose of the memoirs used in this thesis is to preserve memory, to promote continuity between generations of immigrants, and to educate their varied audiences. But while these texts attempt to capture the events of a certain period in order to convey truth or factual evidence, they also do privilege certain themes and events, such as the journey to the United States, processing through entry checkpoints in the United States,

the labor performed in the United States, a comparison of conditions in the United States and in the country of origin, intergenerational conflicts, the life choices and behavior of children in the United States, the importance of education, the loss of familiar customs and languages, and the lack of cultural community. Interestingly, novels written by Asian American women seem to privilege the same events and themes. Moreover, these literary works are written with careful consideration of audience, typically a literary audience. Using sociological data to support analysis of these texts not only reaffirms the themes and conditions related in literary texts, thereby validating their credibility, but also enriches our understanding of the way these events are carried in memory, shared with younger generations, and presented to the public.

As a master's student of comparative literature and cultural studies, I have not been trained in sociology or anthropology. While I have taken classes in these fields, I have not performed my own research in them. Recognizing this weakness, I am carefully evaluating current commentary concerning cultural studies and interdisciplinarity.<sup>4</sup> For example, consider the Spring 2007 issue of Victorian Review, which contains a forum on this subject. In this issue, Joanne Shattock proposes that "it is impossible to achieve...the 'interiority' required to connect with more than one discipline" (57). Instead of striving for interdisciplinarity, she suggests that writers and scholars use a "multi-disciplinary" or "cross-disciplinary" perspective (Shattock 58).

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<sup>4</sup> Other particularly helpful examinations of interdisciplinary research within gender studies, women's studies, English, history, and sociology include: "New Trends in Research Funding – Threat or Opportunity for Interdisciplinary Gender Research?" by Suvi Keskinen and Harriet Silius, "Ph.D. Programs and the Research Mission of Women's Studies: The Case for Interdisciplinarity" by Sally L. Kitch, "Readers, Evidence, and Interdisciplinarity" by Frances E. Dolan, and "Sociology Meets International Relations: the True Story of Cinderella and the Prince" by Luc Sindjoun.

Linda Hughes underscores this theory by explaining that individuals trained in a specific field will privilege the methodologies of that field over others (32). With this in mind, I perform a multidisciplinary study, taking into account that culture and acculturation occur in a number of forms in all levels and aspects of society and that examining research outside of my primary field is necessary in order to provide a broad and strong background for the literary texts discussed in my thesis.

Cultural studies have exploded in the last forty years, as has the publication of books about bicultural and multicultural experience. At this time it is imperative that the average individual and particularly educators and counselors have an understanding of the many cultures that create the cultural atmosphere of the United States. It is my hope that this thesis will be a resource for educators and counselors as they help Asian immigrant children and their parents acculturate to a new educational system. Recently, Jean Lau Chin in Learning from My Mother's Voice has highlighted the importance of mothers in shaping the cultural values of their children. Indeed, she explains that mothers are the maintainers, shapers, and purveyors of cultural values as they pass those values on to their children. As cultural studies departments, women's studies departments, ethnic studies departments, and students study and evaluate literature and scholarship concerning immigration and multiculturalism, it is essential that they recognize the sometimes quiet contributions of women and mothers to the development and perpetuation of multiculturalism within the United States. Immigration narratives, both fiction and nonfiction, emphasize the role of women in maintaining the home and creating a sense of continuity or discontinuity for their children. It is the intent of this

thesis to provide an accessible, interdisciplinary examination of this powerful role of women so that it may continue to be recognized for use in counseling and educational services as well as celebrated among women.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Present research concerning immigration narratives, child-rearing in Asian cultures and the United States, model minority women, and mothering techniques of immigrant women in the United States tends to follow very specific paths. Sociologists examine child rearing practices and the acculturation of parents and children. Educators evaluate the cultural differences in education systems and curricula in Asian cultures and the United States. Historians record both broad and specific accounts of Asian immigration to the United States. Other scholars, including women's studies and cultural studies scholars, compile first-hand accounts of immigration stories. Immigrants themselves maintain high levels of participation in all of these fields of scholarship. In addition, they and their descendants sometimes publish personal memoirs and family sagas as well as novels based upon immigration narratives. However, work that cuts across each of these fields of study is rare. In "Interdisciplinarity and Cultural Studies" Nicholas Daly explains his interest in interdisciplinarity, which, he considers, "allows me to do a certain kind of archaeological work – not, perhaps, uncovering a whole way of life...but at least a historical formation whose fragments resonate with each other" (19). Daly highlights the importance of incorporating a historical dimension into cultural studies in order to "enhance our

understanding of the residues of the past...[and] to imagine how cultural forms operated in a world different to our own” (19).

As I began research for this thesis I discovered that interdisciplinarity – or, better, multidisciplinary, in which information and methodologies from several disciplines are used to provide a solid theoretical basis for examination of a topic – would be essential in this project to gather a sense of the culture surrounding Asian American mothers. While initially I began by examining novels by first-, second-, and third-generation Asian American women, it seemed logical that I would also consider memoirs by Asian Americans and first-hand accounts recorded by sociologists and historians. To augment my knowledge of the immigration experiences of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean women, I also felt the need to read historical accounts and evaluations of Asian immigration over the past 150 years. Finally, I evaluated sociological data and anthropological evaluations in order to enhance my understanding of mothering in China, Japan, and Korea compared to mothering in the United States. The result is that this thesis draws upon scholarship produced in each of these disciplines to examine a range of textual types exploring the reasons Chinese, Japanese, and Korean women immigrate, the ways they acculturate, the methods of child-rearing they use in the United States, and the techniques they use to mitigate, or not, these cultural differences for their children.

Extensive research is available from each of the fields listed above for use in this thesis. For instance, Sham’ah Md Yunus has written a detailed article, “Childcare Practices in Three Asian Countries,” using sociological research to chronicle the typical

child-rearing practices, from birth to adulthood, of mothers in China, Korea, and India, that is indispensable for understanding the essential differences between collectivist and individualistic cultures. In addition, Qie Xing's studies concerning the responsibilities and expectations of modern, urban Chinese parents for their children provide a useful comparison to modern first- and second-generation Chinese American parents. From the standpoint of the education system, Susan E. Short, Jean Lau Chin, and Nancy K. Freeman have published informative evaluations and comparisons of the educational systems in Asia and the United States that correlate very closely with anecdotes in novels and memoirs by Asian American women. Thorough historical accounts of Asian immigration to the United States from the 1860s onwards by sociologist Gary Okihiro and historians Ronald Takaki, Sucheng Chan, and Iris Chang provide the basis for much of my research. Okihiro, Takaki, and Wu, in particular, closely examine and undermine the "model minority" phenomenon, a topic that received careful consideration in the formation and development of this thesis. Finally, Bornstein provides the theoretical framework for this thesis with his examination of the basic differences between collectivist and individualist societies. In addition, as co-editor of the insightful book Acculturation and Parent-Child Relationships, Bornstein highlights multiple facets of the immigrant experience as well as typical problems that immigrants encounter in the United States.

Literary sources for this thesis range from novels to memoirs to first-hand accounts of the immigrant experience. Eric Liu's Accidental Asian and Kyoko Mori's Polite Lies: On Being a Woman Caught Between Two Cultures reflect upon and rebel

against the cultural liminality that the “model minority” stereotype has imposed upon first- and second-generation Asian Americans. These two books perfectly complement the work done by Wu, Takaki, and Okihiro in this area. Women’s studies scholars Jill Bystydzienski and Estelle Resnik have compiled a fascinating book, Women in Cross-Cultural Transitions, filled with first-hand accounts of emigrant and immigrant women of a number of ethnicities concerning their experiences in America as well as their acculturation, or lack thereof. In addition, Jean Lau Chin and Wendy Ho have written scholarly memoirs and Joann Faung Jean Lee recorded first-hand accounts concerning the immigrant experience ranging from the early to the late 1900s that provide insight and clear resemblance to the historical and sociological sources listed above. Literary memoirs that have created a basis for comparison and examination of the experience of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean mothers in the United States include Falling Leaves by Adeline Yen Mah (published 1997, covers 1930s-1990s), Talking to High Monks in the Snow by Lydia Minatoya (published 1993, covers 1870s-1970s), Bento Box in the Heartland by Linda Furiya (published 2006, covers 1970s-1980s), and On Gold Mountain by Lisa See (published 1995, covers 1860s-1990s). The novels Bone by Fae Myenne Ng (published 1994, covers ~1920s-1990s), Typical American by Gish Jen (published 1992, covers ~1940s-1980s), The Joy Luck Club by Amy Tan (published 1989, covers ~1930s-1980s), The Woman Warrior by Maxine Hong Kingston (published 1975, covers ~1930s-1970s), and Comfort Woman by Nora Okja Keller (published 1997, covers ~1920s-1980s), written by second-generation Asian American women, also provide strong points of reference for this analysis.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

It is common knowledge that East Asian societies are based upon a collective, rather than an individualistic framework; however, clear definitions of these terms can be difficult to find. For the sake of clarity, this thesis uses the definitions and characteristics of individualist and collectivist cultures posed by Bornstein in his study “Maternal Personality and Parenting Cognitions in Cross-Cultural Perspective,” to provide an appropriate context in which to evaluate the child-rearing practices of East Asian mothers and the complicated mothering performed by East Asian immigrants within the individualist American culture. Bornstein describes the individualist-collectivist dichotomy as “the balance between the individual and the collectivity that predominates in a given culture” (195). With this in mind, it seems likely that non-traditional or independently minded women, such as those who have decided to leave their country of origin and immigrate to the United States, would respond more openly and adeptly to new cultural norms than their traditional counterparts.<sup>5</sup> Bornstein continues his discussion by relating the particular qualities that are valued by individualist and collectivist cultures; individualist cultures value “independence, autonomy...uniqueness, achievement orientation, and competition,” all unmistakable characteristics of traditional American culture, while collectivist cultures stress “social

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<sup>5</sup> It is my intention to pursue this avenue of thought more fully at another time. It seems logical that the openness of radical or progressive East Asian immigrant women toward United States culture would greatly affect their mothering and their willingness to acculturate to American customs. At this point, my research has led me to the tentative conclusion that women who behaved counter-culturally in their country of origin are actually less adept at addressing culture shock and assimilating successfully. Rather, finding the United States less hospitable than they had imagined, they revert to the familiarity and comfort of following the traditions of their country of origin often even more fervently than they had when they lived in China, Japan, or Korea.

interdependence... connectedness... social harmony... conformity and mutual deference” (Bornstein 195). Clearly, the traditional modes of behavior of these two cultures are often in direct contrast. As a result, Asian women who immigrate to the United States face intense pressures: how can they balance the influences of differing cultures while mothering?

The individualist-collectivist dichotomy has been used as a theoretical framework through which sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists, among others, have made predictions about social life, values and choices of individuals within a society (Bornstein 195). In this instance, individualist versus collectivist aspects of culture will be used to evaluate the mothering behavior of East Asian women as they perform in the cultural context of the United States. Specifically, throughout this thesis, I examine sociological data concerning the child-rearing performance and cultural expectations of mothers in Asian culture in order to provide a basis of comparison for the mothering techniques and challenges of East Asian women who have immigrated to the United States. In particular, this thesis draws upon data concerning the personal care of infants, the clearly defined gender roles of parenting, the prominence of nonverbal communication in Asian cultures, the emphasis upon collectivism within individual achievement, and the family focus on education, as well as the methods of discipline used by Asian mothers and caretakers in the development of their children.

## CHAPTER II

### WHY IMMIGRATE?

#### INTRODUCTION

This chapter is intent upon providing a historical and literary examination of the reasons Chinese, Japanese, and Korean women have ventured to the United States and the conditions they have found there. This analysis will construct a solid foundation for identifying the problems Asian immigrant women face in performing cross-cultural mothering and for evaluating those problems through literary analysis in the following chapters. In particular, this chapter explains the uniqueness of the immigration situation of East Asian women who traveled to the United States during the nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries. In addition, the present chapter highlights common factors in the Chinese, Japanese, and Korean immigration to the United States as well as their treatment in the United States. These factors are supported and represented in sociological and historical data as well as by memoirs, novels, and biographies.

As expressed in the previous chapter, the memoirs, biographies, and autobiographies used in this thesis are considered to be largely mimetic representations of historical events. However, I recognize that these texts privilege certain aspects of the immigration experience. Because of the fluidity and freedom associated with literary texts, some of the novels, memoirs, and autobiographies used by this thesis, in particular Comfort Woman and Asian Americans, can also be seen as minimally threatening (to the dominant culture) attempts by the authors to represent and expose the more repugnant

topics, such as sexual slavery, racism, and bigotry, that often surround the Asian immigrant experience in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

## **CHINESE IMMIGRANTS**

In the 1830s Chinese men became the first emigrants of Asian descent to venture to the United States en masse. Fleeing the British Opium Wars of 1839-1842, peasant rebellions, and increasingly hostile feuds between family clans, Chinese men of the poorer classes borrowed the money necessary for the passage from friends, family, or employers and ventured toward “The Golden Mountain” (Takaki 56-60, 34-35). Their purpose? To make an incredible fortune picking gold nuggets off the ground in California and return wealthy and esteemed men to their own villages in China, buy back family land, and live out the rest of their days in leisure and study (Takaki 31). With this goal in mind, these men worked as indentured servants in wretched conditions for pay far below that of the average white man. Despite their suffering, these Chinese men worked during the gold rush as temporary workers (Takaki 34-35), as sugarcane harvesters in Hawaii (Takaki 39), as laundrymen, and as substitutes for black slaves on plantations after the Civil War, albeit carefully watching and negotiating their contracts (Chang, The Chinese 96-99). The latter role lasted less than ten years, as the Chinese

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, Nora Okja Keller’s Comfort Woman is based upon actual stories about “comfort women” or sex slaves for the Japanese war camps during World War II. Her book received much attention by the press for its daring condemnation and examination of the conditions of a comfort woman. After the publication of her book, several women who had been used as comfort women against their will came forward to speak publicly and give interviews about their experiences. During the 1990s the Japanese government made various apologies admitting that the government had some involvement in the production and maintenance of comfort camps. However, they have not made formal restitution to surviving comfort women. Last year, the United States House of Representatives passed a resolution requesting that Japan apologize formally to surviving comfort women. For more information, see the July 31, 2007 edition of the San Francisco Chronicle.

laborers shrewdly hired men to monitor and negotiate their contracts. In addition, these Chinese immigrants and their advisors sued plantation owners in local, Southern courts when they performed a breach of contract and sometimes won their cases (Chang, The Chinese 98).

As a whole, these laborers saved their money to send back to their families in China or to take back with them. However, money seemed to slip away in the United States, and after five, ten, fifteen, or even twenty-five years, men began to forget their families back home. They began forgetting to send money or letters; they forgot their dreams of returning; they paid for their wives to come to the United States; they stayed. For instance in On Gold Mountain, Fong Dun Shung, the great-great-grandfather of Lisa See and an esteemed herbalist, emigrated to the United States as a railroad worker in 1866, arriving on the shores of San Francisco in early 1867 (See 6). After a few years, like some other railroad workers, Fong Dun Shung began to forget his son and wife in China. Much to the chagrin of his family, he did not send money back home; rather, he invested it in his own ventures in herbal healing. To further compound his separation from his family in China, he married a Chinese prostitute and began settling himself in San Francisco to stay (See 18).

It was this very eventuality – temporary workers settling in the country – that the U.S. government was most eager to avoid. To curtail the settlement of Chinese families in the United States, the legislature began passing Exclusionist laws, which became increasingly stringent as time passed. First, the Page Law prevented prostitutes from immigrating and carefully interrogated women claiming to be wives of Chinese

men in the United States (Takaki 40). Next, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 prevented the immigration of all Chinese laborers. An 1888 emendation to that law prohibited Chinese laborers from traveling in and out of the country (Takaki 41). The purpose of these laws was to prevent Chinese men from settling down and beginning families. Miscegenation laws were passed so that Chinese men could not marry women of other ethnicities in the United States. As a result of some of these laws, in 1880, the ratio of men to women was a shocking twenty to one – a total of 100,686 men and only 4,779 women (Chang, The Chinese 173). In 1890, due to additional exclusion laws, the ratio was 27 to 1 (Chan 107). As late as 1920, the number was still seven to one (Chang, The Chinese 173). While Chinese immigration began as European immigration had hundreds of years earlier with men arriving first, settling, and then calling for their families, exclusion prevented Chinese men from sending for their families and severely truncated the development of the Chinese community in America, something that made lives for Asian American women and their children much more difficult (Chan 105).

Further complicating this issue, Chinese women were disinclined to leave their families and culture to join their husbands or potential grooms in the United States. In fact, from 1906 until 1924, only one hundred and fifty Chinese women received permission from the American government to immigrate to the United States. From 1924 to 1930, none were admitted. In Chinese the terms “family” and “home” are synonymous; as such, Chinese women were bound to their duties in the home (Takaki 47). Limited by cultural expectations and, in some cases, the physical limitation of bound feet, it was considered better for a woman to stay at home with her husband’s

family than to venture across the seas to the United States. From a pragmatic perspective, many families kept their sons' wives in China or married their sons off just before they emigrated to ensure continued family loyalty (Takaki 37).

Pang-Mei Natasha Chang's family memoir Bound Feet and Western Dress depicts a strong example of this. Pang-Mei's great-aunt, Chang Yu-i, was forced to marry a son of the Hsüs, Chih-mo, just before he left the family village to begin his studies in Tianjin (Chang, Bound Feet 87). Chih-mo eventually continued his studies in other countries, including the United States, while only making brief visits back to his family village to insure that Yu-i could become pregnant with his children to perpetuate the family line. Despite Yu-i's desire to travel to her husband, the Hsü family required her to remain in Xiashi with them in order to maintain a connection to their son and their continuing family line. While this technique did not tie Chih-mo more closely to his family, it did estrange Yu-i and Chih-mo and ultimately resulted in the first official divorce in Chinese history as well as Chih-mo's abandonment of his own child and parents for a number of mistresses. On the other hand, Yu-i remained faithful to Chinese tradition, caring for her in-laws even after Chih-mo divorced her. Indeed, it seems that the rash of quick marriages followed by emigration of husbands to the United States was rarely a strong enough incentive for Chinese men to ask their wives to emigrate to join them or for them to return home without the riches they desired to earn. However, often it did compel new husbands to send money home to their families and wives.

Despite the traditional restrictions upon Chinese women, some women did follow their husbands to the United States, only to be disappointed by what they found. Iris

Chang narrates the dismay of one wife of a Chinese laundryman as she recalls her arrival in the United States: “In China in the old days women thought that people came over to pick gold...Ai! Really! They thought they were coming to Gold Mountain to pick gold. You think they knew that they were coming to work in a laundry?” (The Chinese 169). In Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior, a main character, Brave Orchid, emigrates to the United States after her husband has established himself in a laundry business. Brave Orchid quickly finds herself rising early in the morning to make breakfast for her family and doing the daily shopping. During the day and into the evening hours, she worked steaming, pressing, and folding clothes in the laundry. By night, she cooked dinner and cleaned the house for her children and husband. Never complaining, Brave Orchid enlisted the help of her children in performing her laundry work, keeping her youngest child, an infant, in a basket by a window in the laundry – as far from the dust and chemicals as possible. Swallowing their disappointment, these Chinese women worked both with their husbands during the day and at home in the early mornings and late evenings.

Wives of workers, however, were not the only Chinese women to come to the United States. The scarcity of Chinese women in the United States made them a very expensive and often profitable commodity. While a few women immigrated as picture brides, they were disappointed to find themselves locked behind closed doors, sometimes only allowed to leave their homes to celebrate the Chinese New Year (Chan 110-111). With the prevalence of tong and the high occurrence of kidnapping, Chinese husbands feared that their wives might be kidnapped and sold or used in the sex trade

(Chan 110). In fact, sexual slavery was one of the most profitable businesses in California beginning in the 1880s and continuing well into the twentieth century. Iris Chang explains that “most of these women (prostitutes) did not come by choice but were forced into degradation” (The Chinese 81). These women were sold by family members to pay debts or to provide extra income, like Lilac Chen; were tricked into boarding vessels leaving their home country; were kidnapped; or were taken to the United States to be prostituted by men who had promised their families to marry them (Takaki 41-42). Lilac Chen was six years old when her father sold her to cover a gambling debt. She traveled on a ferry boat to the United States where she was prostituted (Takaki 41). Wong Ah So was a nineteen-year-old when a laundryman contracted with her mother to marry the teenager and take her to the United States. Once in San Francisco, the laundryman sold her to be a sex slave (Takaki 42). However, it must be noted that prostitution was considered a lucrative occupation in the United States. As such, by the year 1870 over 2,000 Chinese women had entered the States with the intent of becoming prostitutes and listed their occupations as “prostitute” on their census forms (Takaki 41).

Once in the United States, female sex slaves or prostitutes were bound to members of the tongs, Chinese business associations originally developed to promote unity and success in the Chinese community but which sometimes became threatening, monopolizing entities, and forced to sign unethical contracts. Typical contracts would require women to make up time they were sick, menstruating, or pregnant with double or triple time added to the end of their original contract (Chang, The Chinese 85). In addition, these women were often leased to factories to work during the day and obliged

to prostitute themselves at night (Takaki 122). While women could be purchased from the tong to become sex slaves to other enterprises or wives, more often than not these marriages became just as bad, if not worse, than their lives as prostitutes (Chang, The Chinese 88). Running away from their imprisonment was not an option. With so few Chinese women in the United States, the women were easily recaptured and severely punished. One woman relates, “My owners were never satisfied, no matter how much money I made...My last mistress...used to whip me, pull my hair, and pinch the inside of my cheeks” (qtd. in Takaki 122). In addition to the women’s dismal lifestyles and poor care, syphilis and gonorrhea were rampant among the prostitutes and the men they were forced to service (Takaki 122-123). As a result of their slavish and hopeless state, suicide became a viable way, and at times, the only way, for Chinese prostitutes to achieve freedom. They would accomplish this by jumping out of windows or swallowing opium (Chang, The Chinese 84).

Nevertheless, Chang explains that despite the strict and biased regulations of the United States government, the wretched lifestyle of laborers, and the horrifying mistreatment and abuse of women, “the Gold Mountain” remained an idyllic dream for poorer Chinese. Overworked laundrymen and laborers worked sixteen- and twenty-hour days. With time for nothing else, they sent whatever they could to family members in China. This created and perpetuated a false image of the degree of success Chinese immigrant men had attained in the United States. Chang states that the money sent by emigrants back to China “transformed entire regions in Guangdong. It paid for new technology, electric lights, paved roads, and new schools” (The Chinese 170). In fact,

Toishan County, from which the majority of the first wave of Chinese emigrants originated, had a ninety percent literacy rate by 1910 because of the amount of wealth sent there by Chinese men working in the U.S. (Chang, The Chinese 170).

While counties in China grew wealthy, they demanded more help from their families in China. The amounts of money immigrants sent were so great by Chinese standards that the natives believed that their relatives were truly wealthy, and their immigrant relatives did not dissuade them. After all, it was an honor to be able to provide generously for an entire family with the meager wages from a merciless job. Lisa See records a story of her uncle, Fong Yun, and his complicated relationship with his wife and children in China. Fong Yun never remarried in the United States and sent every penny he could to Leong-shee and their four sons and one daughter. The successes of the Fong family, however, were widely known in their home village of Dimtao and the surrounding areas. Hearing of the Fong family's wealthy reputation, a group of bandits captured three of Fong Yun's sons – Ho, Haw, and Duk – and held them for ransom. Duk, an infant, died two days after his capture, while Ho and Haw spent eight months with their captors (See 160-161). Finally the release of the two sons was negotiated for \$2000, a sum Fong Yun could not have afforded, and which his more prosperous brother, Fong See, paid (See 164-165). The fact that it took eight months to negotiate the kidnappers down to a sum, which though outrageous the Fong family could pay, is a clear indication of the gap between the reality of the income that the wealthiest Chinese emigrants were earning – and the Fongs were certainly some of the wealthiest

Chinese emigrants of the time – and the sums local villagers imagined were being earned by these men.

As a result of the perpetuation of these rumors of wealth and plenty, few Chinese men or women heard or believed the stories of cruelty and poor working conditions and if they did, felt that they could tolerate the misery for three to five years in exchange for a life of luxury (Chang, The Chinese 170-171). The men who returned to China were full of stories of their successes, not their misfortunes; they wrote home of their accomplishments, not their hunger and exhaustion (Chang, The Chinese 171). Takaki explains that an additional complication was the active recruitment techniques used by labor brokers. These unscrupulous individuals handed out circulars, spoke Chinese, and earnestly promised potential migrants that “Americans are very rich people. They want the Chinaman to come and make him very welcome. There you will have great pay, large houses, and food and clothing of the finest description...It is a nice country, without mandarins or soldiers...Money is in great plenty and to spare in America” (qtd. in Takaki 34). Though this could not have been further from the truth, with little land available to farm, starvation and necessity became the impetus behind “the emigrating spirit;” what did these Chinese men and women have to lose (Takaki 33)?

## **JAPANESE IMMIGRANTS**

The Japanese began immigrating to the United States in the 1880s (Takaki 42). After carefully viewing the unenthusiastic response of the United States government to Chinese immigration, the Japanese government decided that they would allow Japanese

citizens to travel to the United States to work and to settle, but only middle-class, well-educated individuals would be given visas (Takaki 46). At this time the population of Japan was so great in comparison with the land available that the country was in the midst of an enormous depression. One journalist recalls that a typical meal for lower classes during this time was “rice husk or buckwheat chaff ground into powder and the dregs of bean curd mixed with leaves and grass” (qtd. in Takaki 43). In a single year, 300,000 families were stripped of their family lands and left destitute with no way to earn money, nowhere to go, and no one to beg from (Takaki 43). Monthly American wages seemed incredibly high to eager Japanese ears; the average salary in the United States was six times the salary of a Japanese day laborer (Takaki 44). After three to five years of hard work, a man could save enough money to live in wealth with his family for the rest of his life. Oldest sons, as the future of their families, began journeying to the United States to earn money to pay off family debts (Takaki 44-45). Younger sons saw the United States as their land of opportunity as the inheritance laws of Japan dictated that all family holdings went to the oldest son and younger sons had no means of potential income, particularly with the extreme depression in Japan (Takaki 49).

Despite the fact that the average Japanese immigrant was better educated than the average white American at that time, Japanese immigrants faced the same racism as their Chinese counterparts. They were baffled by the inability of Americans to tell the difference between Chinese and Japanese. However, the government was less restrictive of Japanese immigration and the importation of women as “picture brides” than they were of the emigration of Chinese women. Japanese women, who were allotted more

individual freedoms in Japan than Chinese women were permitted in China, were sent as “picture brides” to Japanese men in the West (Takaki 47). These women had become used to working outside of the home and were permitted to support themselves financially (Takaki 48). As well, they were encouraged to travel and educate themselves. In Bento Box, Linda Furiya’s mother, Teruko, falls into this category of Japanese women. After receiving a good education, Teruko obtains an important position working at a local bank. Though she earns a significant salary, she lives at home and spends the money on clothing and vacations with her friends (Furiya 28). However, when her parents suggest that she pursue marriage with a Japanese emigrant to the United States, she considers their request (Furiya 29). She confides in her daughter, “I did have bad dreams before I left...I started worrying when I couldn’t even find the name of the town on a map. In my dream I came back to Tokyo with no husband, no job only feeling disgrace. I decided that I would not allow myself to return home, no matter what happened” (Furiya 31). Thus, she bows to the parental and cultural pressure and ventures to Versailles, Indiana to meet and live with her husband.

Hopeful about the potential of living in a new country, these Japanese picture brides followed the demands of their families and immigrated to new lives in the United States anticipating educational and financial opportunities and even adventure. Takaki records the excitement of Michiko Tanaka: “I wanted to see foreign countries and besides I had consented to marriage...because I had the dream of seeing America...I was bubbling over with great expectations” (qtd. 48). Other Japanese women came to the United States unwillingly; they were sold as slaves, deceived, or kidnapped and sold to

be prostitutes in the West (Takaki 51). As a result of the picture bride industry, the prostitution industry, and the adventurousness of ordinary Japanese women (encouraged by the Japanese government), by 1920 Japanese women made up over thirty-four percent of the total Japanese population in the United States (Takaki 47). However, in 1920, the Japanese Association of America, sensitive to the growing discomfort of the United States government because of the increasing settlement of Japanese families on the American mainland, agreed to uphold the Ladies' Agreement of 1920 and stop issuing passports to Japanese "picture brides" (Chan 109).

Life in the United States was often not as good as picture brides and other Japanese women expected. Conditions in the Western United States were grim. With no niceties, the minimum of shelter, and an inordinate amount of work to perform to survive, Japanese women, like Chinese women, were expected to labor by their husbands' sides in addition to caring for the home. One Japanese picture bride recalls:

in June 1910, I went to my husband's...place...The house, however, was just a slant-roofed shanty such as swine live in...[it] was still so wild that bears, wolves and wild cats came around, and of course there was no electricity or running water...Before we could afford a machine to cut wood, my husband and I cut trees with an eight-foot saw...At that time we had two children, aged three and one, and with them to take care of I couldn't do so much work, so when a friend of ours went back to Japan, I asked him to take them with him...I thought of them on the boat, calling

for their mother, and I couldn't sleep for sorrow and loneliness. (Chan 110)

With no female companions nearby, at times forced to send their children away, these immigrant women became determined to see their children succeed in the country in which they were laboring (Chan 110).

### **KOREAN IMMIGRANTS**

Korean men and women began immigrating in the early 1900s after the Japanese began invading and taking possession of their country. Under Japanese oppression, Korean families lost their property (Chang, The Chinese 55), experienced racism and extermination by the Japanese (Takaki 54-55), were controlled by political gangs, and starved to death by the thousands (Takaki 55). To these men and women life in America represented freedom. No matter how hard they were forced to work, at least they were permitted to work and able to purchase food to feed themselves and their children. In the United States they would not be controlled by Japanese gangs or legal dictates, nor would they be forced into prostitution. In fact, Soon Hyo, a main character of Nora Okja Keller's Comfort Woman, escapes her life as a comfort woman in the Japanese military encampments and is rescued by a Christian missionary group. As the Japanese began shutting down the country and forcing foreigners to vacate Korea, the head missionary, Rick, asks Soon Hyo to marry him and accompany him to the United States. With nowhere to go and no family to return home to, Soon Hyo agrees and looks forward to what life in the United States can bring her.

Due to the extreme brutalization of their own country, Koreans became the most broadly defined group of immigrants in terms of social class and gender. Koreans of all social classes immigrated to the United States because it was essential for them to escape the desolation of their own country (Takaki 53). Charles Ryu, a Korean minister in the United States, explains that the first Koreans came to the United States in the early 1900s as sugarcane workers in Hawaii (“Traffic” 97). Korean women eagerly became picture brides through Japanese agents because living in Korea was nearly impossible (Takaki 56-57). One woman recalled, “We left Korea because we were too poor... We had nothing to eat. There was absolutely no way we could survive” (Takaki 55). Another migrant explained, “It was a very hard time... Under the Japanese, no freedom. Not even free talking... I wanted to come (to the United States), so, I sent my picture. Ah, marriage! Then I could get to America! ... Since I became ten, I’ve been forbidden to step outside our gates, just like the rest of the girls... So becoming a picture bride would be my answer and release” (Takaki 56).

While immigration to the United States seemed like an ideal solution for Koreans, in 1905 Japan began exercising political control over Korea and prevented all Koreans from immigrating to the United States in order to maintain a monopoly on the labor market (Takaki 57). In 1965 immigration laws in the United States changed and Koreans began immigrating to the United States once again. Ryu explains that when he immigrated in the 1970s he “didn’t have very many dreams” (“1.5 Generation” 53). On the contrary, “Coming to America was just another way of living, because survivability in Korea was questioned” (Ryu, “1.5 Generation” 53). Another draw to the United

States for many Koreans is the prevalence of Christianity in the U.S. Christianity is a popular religion in Korea. For this reason, many Korean men brought their wives and children with them to Hawaii or the United States while under the impression that they were settling their families in Christian regions in which they would be treated fairly by local residents and authorities (Chan 104). At this time, there are over one million Korean Americans living in the United States (Ryu, "Traffic" 98).

As we have seen in this chapter, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean men and women have immigrated to the United States for a myriad of reasons. While the first wave of Chinese and Japanese men intended to make their fortunes in the United States and then return home, triumphant, to their families, as the years passed the majority of immigrants stayed in the U.S., despite the hardship and racism they faced, and settled their families here. Typically, men immigrated to obtain profitable work. In their own countries war, poverty, and political unrest prevented them from earning enough money to support their families and maintain their family honor. Once in the United States these men worked hard, usually sending home their extra money to support their families, including their new wives and young children. However, some men did neglect their families in order to pursue their own fortunes and established new lives on American shores. Women, on the other hand, ventured to the United States when and how they were told. While many were scared of what might await them in the foreign country and feared the loss of the support of their community, others had real hopes that they would be able to attain more for themselves and their children in a new country with less restrictive customs. In the United States, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean women were faced with sexism, racism,

poverty, loss of culture, and a lack of community. Nevertheless, they did have the opportunity to work alongside their husbands and earn money – often more than what was possible in their country of origin. Moreover, they caught glimpses of American success and prosperity and maintained the hope that their children, if not themselves, could secure that success. These Chinese, Japanese, and Korean immigrants are unusual in that they were able to overcome, in a mere one or two generations, the myriad of challenges they faced in the United States through the successes of their children.

## CHAPTER III

### IDENTIFYING THE STRAINS OF IMMIGRATION ON MODEL MINORITY MOTHERING

#### INTRODUCTION

The preceding chapter laid out some of the reasons Chinese, Japanese, and Korean women immigrated to the United States and what they found here during the 1880s to the 1940s. The present chapter seeks to identify some of the most significant strains upon mothering in the United States for these women as well as the ways that the reasons these women immigrate to the United States feeds into their future challenges and successes on American soil. Many of the methods of child-rearing traditionally utilized in collectivist Asian cultures contrast greatly with traditional American child-rearing practices. In Asian Americans: An Interpretive History, Sucheng Chan explains, “Bringing youngsters up in a world in which the parents themselves [are] pariahs [is] a difficult task; being parents force[s] many immigrants to assess where they [stand] vis-à-vis their homelands as well as America” (103). Thus, as Asian women immigrate to the United States, they must deal with their own culture shock; however, they must also decide how they will incorporate the characteristics of the individualist, American culture into their own ideals of mothering or whether they will utilize the pathways to social mobility in America without altering any of their cultural methods of mothering. Sociological research, as well as memoirs, cultural studies, and novels by Asian

American women, points to several significant cultural strains upon the mothering of Asian American immigrants that I wish to examine in more detail in this chapter.

From Marc Bornstein's identification of the key differences between individualist and collectivist cultures, "independence, autonomy...uniqueness, achievement orientation, and competition" versus "social interdependence... connectedness... social harmony... conformity and mutual deference," it becomes clear that particular issues will be more difficult for these women to negotiate than others (Bornstein 195). With the theoretical framework of collectivist vs. individualist cultures in mind, these strains include a lack of family or community support for mothers, the experience of a different education system with new methods of attaining upward mobility, power-reversals between mothers and children encountered because of the relative ease of assimilation of children into American culture and the use of the English language, and complex juggling of cultural norms of the country of origin (China, Japan, or Korea) with American cultural standards. These differing cultural positions include, but are not limited to, the continuation and transference of religion, holidays and festivals, access to traditional foods, and the unexpected individualistic and independent desires of children. This chapter discusses these quandaries and the reasons that they are particularly challenging for East Asian immigrant mothers.

Every novel, historical account, memoir, autobiography, biography, and social study that I have examined underscores the importance of community within East Asian societies. However, as we saw in the previous chapter, families of immigrants rarely travel together. In fact, the Exclusionist laws, not fully repealed until the Immigration

Act of 1965, strictly limited the immigration of male Asian immigrants and even more severely restricted the travel of Asian women to the United States. Thus, the social interdependence and connectedness which serve as central aspects of community for East Asian families is shattered once men and women begin immigrating to the United States. As a result, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean women who are accustomed to being members of very large family clans in which the women work together to care for the home and children lose the sense of place and feeling of emotional well-being that being part of a large family unit gave them.<sup>7</sup> In addition, these women accept far more domestic responsibilities as they have no other women to help them with their duties.

Indeed, the loss of community and place that Asian immigrant women face in the United States is strongly disorienting. These immigrant women know few or no other women in the United States, thanks in no small part to the Page Act of 1875, the Gentleman's Agreement of 1907, and the Ladies Agreement of 1921, all of which restricted women from immigrating to the United States even to join their husbands. In addition, when Asians have immigrated to the United States, typically men immigrate first and then try to have their wives and children follow. As we saw in the previous chapter, because of the Exclusionist Laws and the restricted living conditions in the United States, many men were unable to sponsor their wives travel to the United States. This resulted in an even smaller pool of women available to provide community for one

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<sup>7</sup> While much has been written about the poor treatment of wives, concubines, and female servants or house workers in Asian countries, much of it by women or daughters of women who have experienced it, it is irrefutable that once these women immigrate to another country they suffer from a loss of orientation within their community, a lack of place within larger society, loneliness, and a lack of support in the home as well as in child care.

other in the United States. Very few<sup>8</sup> extended families immigrate to the United States. Rather, individuals or small groups of family members – brothers, a husband and wife, a wife and her children – are more likely to immigrate to the United States together, usually leaving behind generations of middle-aged parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and at times, children. For instance, in The Woman Warrior, Brave Orchid's husband precedes her to the United States by almost fifteen years with the promise of returning to China a wealthy man. In the meantime, their two children, a boy and a girl, have died of diseases, and Brave Orchid has gone to Chinese medical school – one of the few women to do so – earned a degree, and is working back in the family village as an esteemed physician. Her daughter explains, “Until my father sent for her to live in the Bronx, my mother delivered babies...She stayed awake keeping watch nightly in an epidemic...She yanked bones straight that had been crooked for years” (Kingston 77). After living apart from her husband for more years than she has lived with him, the independent-minded and accomplished Brave Orchid is expected to follow her husband to a new country as soon as he sends for her. This she does with the hope that their children they bear together in the United States will have more auspicious lives and possibilities than their children in China did.

Other waiting women, however, are not so lucky. In her family memoir, Lisa See explains that her great-grandfather Fong See left his wife Yong in China and never brought her to China. Instead, he married a Caucasian woman, Leticie Pruett, in the

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<sup>8</sup> In all of my research I did not find a record of a single extended family immigrating to the United States together. In fact, among Chinese and Japanese immigrants it was rare for even a nuclear family to immigrate together to the United States. More often a husband would journey first, followed later by his wife and children or followed by his wife and then, later, his children.

States and neglected Yong for many years. The fact that the immigration of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean women is often in the hands of men makes their lives in their countries of origin uncertain and insecure. Moreover, the distance between themselves and their husbands along with their attachment to their own culture and own lives in their home country can make them hesitant to immigrate. As we saw in the previous chapter, Chinese women were among the least willing to leave home and venture to the United States to meet their husbands. Rather, they expected their husbands to simply return home with the money they had earned in the States. However, this was something that these men were rarely able to do as they often had very little money saved because they sent the bulk of their income home to provide for their families in their absence. This uncertain status is an additional challenge for these Asian women.

Once in the United States, these women are expected to take care of the home, raise children, and work alongside their husbands, triple duty compared to what they would have performed in their country of origin, without the help, support, or company of other women. Moreover, they have no female friends or relatives to turn to for advice about raising children, orienting themselves in U.S. culture, finding the right foods to make traditional meals, or to reminisce with about life in their country of origin (Chan 109). Community serves as both a pragmatic and emotional pillar in life for these women; thus, the loss of it is painful and extremely difficult to overcome.<sup>9</sup> For this

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<sup>9</sup> The disorientation of East Asian immigrant women in the United States echoes, in many ways, the behavior of American and European women during and after the Industrial Revolution. During and following the Industrial Revolution, women suffered intensely from separation from their families. With no one to support them emotionally, no one to help raise their children, and no one to counsel them on everyday as well as major events, women suffered a crisis of identity. With the additional workload, poor sanitation, and lack of midwifery knowledge, the number of miscarriages, child deaths, and deaths of

reason, when Brave Orchid, at the age of sixty-eight, is finally able to afford to bring her sister, Moon Orchid, to the United States, she is elated (Kingston 113). She expects to share gossip, housework, labor at the laundry, and child rearing with her sister.

However, she quickly realizes that her sister is “the lovely, useless type” (Kingston 128). Indeed, Moon Orchid, used to having servants in China, is taken aback by the household labor, including putting her own possessions away, that she must perform in the United States (Kingston 134-135). Moreover, unable to speak English or understand the foreign customs that surround her, she feels threatened by the many white faces, or “white ghosts,” that she sees in the streets and stores (Kingston 155). Detached from the only life she has known and rejected by her husband, who traveled to America thirty years before her and married again, Moon Orchid finds herself incapable of adapting to American culture. Ultimately, she has a nervous breakdown and is sent to an asylum, where she creates a new community and personal space for herself through her relationships with the other residents. She considers herself the mother of all the women in the asylum and explains to Brave Orchid that despite their varying countries of origin all of the residents speak the same language to each other. She calls the other women her daughters and carefully watches over the pregnant ones. For their part, the other women appreciate her attention and accept her touches and conversation (Kingston 160). From this example, it is clear that the companionship and kinship provided by

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women in childbirth increased astronomically. As well, the number of emotional breakdowns and infanticides increased dramatically during this time. For more information on this subject, see [The Cruel Mother](#) by Si□n Busby.

community serves as an essential grounding of identity and social place for these women.

However, the Chinese, Japanese, and Korean women who have traveled to the United States and who are confronted with a life of hard work and little success, as we saw in the previous chapter, are rarely thwarted by their lack of community. They either create a new kind of community in the United States, a step toward biculturalism, as we see in Moon Orchid's life, or they find a substitute for the physical presence of community through another medium such as cultural foods, as Teruko Furiya does in Versailles, Indiana in the food memoir Bento Box. The determination of these women is such that they do not mind working so long and so hard that their veins bulge out of their legs so that they must wrap them in cloths (Chang, The Chinese 169) or that they lose half of their body weight (Takaki 190) or that their hair turns all white, their hands harden, and their bodies change shape (Kingston 100-102) because their sacrifice is laying the foundation for the education, upward mobility, and success of their children in the United States. Or, as one Korean immigrant explained, "The first generation must be sacrificed" (qtd. in Takaki 443).

From another perspective, the loss of the function of community as a child rearing aid also becomes problematic. Charles Ryu, a Korean American minister, explains that one of the greatest problems within the Korean immigrant community "is the lack of parental care" of children ("Traffic" 96). He explains that the first-generation immigrants often work for twelve hours a day, seven days a week without considering their work to be too overwhelming. They are dedicated to establishing themselves so

that the second generation will be able to attain success in the United States. While this is stressful for the first-generation families and mothers, they spend so much time working together that the family remain intact and unified. However, as the second generation becomes established, educated, and bi-cultured, they become physically and emotionally distanced from their families, while their parents, including their mothers, are still working, so that the lack of parental care and involvement becomes problematic and leads to familial estrangements, involvement in gangs, and further assimilation into United States culture (Ryu, "Traffic" 96-98).

Further complicating the experience of East Asian women in the United States is the English language, as we saw with *Brave Orchid* and *Moon Orchid*. Few Asians immigrate with fluent English language, and language becomes one of the first issues they must negotiate. When one enters a foreign space and spends time there, even the most mundane tasks, buying groceries, going to the bank, occupy far more time than in one's native country. While language orientation is vitally important for immigrants, it seems to be pointedly ignored, avoided, or inaccessible. Indeed, it can be ignored, easily, if one immigrates into an area that is highly populated by Chinese, Japanese, or Korean immigrants. One Chinese immigrant couple, Kenny and Siu Wing Lai, explain that when they first arrived in the United States Kenny tried to attend English as a Second Language courses at a nearby school. After arriving late to every class for eight or nine months and not learning very much, Kenny quit attending. He explains, "I had no foundation in English, then because I had to work, there was little time to study or to use what I learned in class. Everyone I worked with was Chinese, so we spoke Chinese.

There was little opportunity to speak anything else” (Lai, trans. Lee 72). Even though Kenny tried to learn English, he was inhibited by his primarily Chinese surroundings and particularly by the fact that the majority of his fellow workers and his wife did not speak English.

Whether it is their intention or not, immigrants’ lives become set up so that they tend to avoid contact with “white ghosts,” or American natives, and spend their time among communities of immigrants (Chan 116). An excellent example of this can be found in Lisa See’s family memoir On Gold Mountain. In the memoir, she explains that her Caucasian great-grandmother, Letticie, became part of the Chinese See family through her work as a saleswoman in the See family company. Letticie ventured to Los Angeles looking for a job and found one at the See family lingerie store because the See family needed someone who spoke English fluently and without an accent to appeal to white customers (See 52-53). Though they had been in California for over twenty years, the Sees did not speak fluent English. At home and within their community of friends, almost all men, they spoke in their traditional Chinese register. It was only to interact with white, native customers that they needed to speak English to be successfully businessmen (See 53). In such spaces as Chinatowns or Koreatowns, segments of cities populated predominately by Chinese or Korean immigrants, an immigrant can live comfortably without interacting with native whites and without learning even the most basic English language skills (Bystydzienski 26). While this may not be a topic of concern for first-generation immigrants that remain entrenched within communities of

fellow immigrants in large cities, it does make mothering a second generation, which speaks primarily English, very difficult.

Indeed, the challenge of slipping fluidly between two linguistic registers can become overwhelming, particularly as children learn new languages much more rapidly than their parents and can be used as translators for their family members. As a result of their dependence on their children, the parent-child dynamic is altered. While in Asian culture authoritarian power belongs solely to parents, in immigrant U.S. culture children retain a sense of power because their parents are dependent upon them for daily interactions with the public sphere (Bornstein and Cote 65-66). Lang Ngan explains that this causes a severe cultural shift. He writes that:

children used to have to obey all adults and their teachers because the adults knew more than them and they had to take their advice. But here, it's different. They think they know more than the parents because they can speak the language, and they've adapted faster to the American system and society than their parents. And now they think they are doing better than their parents so many of them don't respect the parents as they had before. And they think they are independent. (Ngan 90)

This independence complicates the family dynamic, forcing the generations into opposing sides and creating intergenerational misunderstandings and conflicts. In addition to this problematic, parents can be intimidated by the linguistic aptitude of their children and refuse to exercise their English or engage in English dialogue for fear that they will lose face in front of their children or that their children will mock them.

As children become more acculturated in the United States and senior generations continue to communicate primarily in their native language, intergenerational linguistic misunderstandings begin to occur frequently. The older generation feels disconnected from the younger generation, at times considering their children or grandchildren to be mere Americans rather than oriented within Chinese, Japanese, or Korean culture (Chan 112). In addition, East Asian cultures often privilege nonverbal communication, verbalizing negative messages in order to project modesty and humility while displaying affection and family traditions through behavior; American culture, on the other hand, heavily emphasizes verbalization (Yunus 40).<sup>10</sup> As a result, second- and third-generation immigrants struggle to understand the words that their families are not verbalizing. This often results in confusion and an exacerbated disconnect between generations. The use of different language and cultural registers both in private and public spaces becomes exhausting and complicated for East Asian immigrants, particularly mothering women.

In The Woman Warrior, Brave Orchid often puzzles over the strangeness of her own children. Moreover, she is distrustful of their cultural allegiance. Throughout the book she calls them “half-ghosts” or half Chinese and half American. As a result, she refuses to “explain anything that [is] really [culturally] important” to them” (Kingston 121). One example of cultural and generational disconnect resulting from an emphasis on nonverbal communication and misunderstanding of cultural traditions occurs when Moon Orchid arrives in Brave Orchid’s home and begins passing out gifts – earrings and

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<sup>10</sup> For a good example of this, consider the relatively recent emphasis on and predominance of the vocalization of “I love you” rather than the dedicated behavior associated with those words.

paper dolls – to Brave Orchid’s children. Brave Orchid is shocked by the behavior of her children several of whom are adults with their own children, when they receive their gifts. She thinks, “How impolite...her children were” for playing with their gifts in front of their aunt (Kingston 121). As she cracks rock candy to give out to her family so that the beginning of Moon Orchid’s life in the United States will “be sweet,” her children resist eating it (Kingston 121). She thinks, “Her children acted as if this eating were a bother...Who would think that children could dislike candy? It was abnormal, not in the nature of children, not human” (Kingston 121). As Brave Orchid walks around the house “mumbling” chants to scare away spirits and bless Moon Orchid’s arrival, her children merely ignore her (Kingston 121).

Striking in this passage is Brave Orchid’s lack of explanation of these cultural traditions – not playing with gifts, eating sweets, and murmuring chants – to her children. The passage makes it clear that Brave Orchid has never verbally explained any of these cultural gestures to her children. Indeed, when they ask, she refuses to answer, saying instead, “It’s nothing” (Kingston 121). Rather, she expects her children to learn from her actions that what she is doing is important. While she feels that her children are abnormal, distanced from herself and Chinese culture, she is refusing to indoctrinate them into that culture. Thus, her children do not eat the candy simply because they do not want it or perhaps in an attempt to follow the Chinese tradition of refusing offers twice before accepting them a third time. Her children play with their gifts, which are appropriate for small children not adults, to indicate interest and appreciation in an American manner. Through the refusal of the first generation to explain the customs that

are so indelibly printed upon their minds and the inability of the second generation to correctly guess the meaning of these cultural gestures, the two generations reach an impasse.

Referencing, once again, Bornstein's examination of the main purposes of collectivist and individualist cultures, we discover that both East Asian and U.S. cultures favor education for attaining upward mobility. The difference is that U.S. culture privileges education for individual achievement and success, while East Asian cultures promote the education of individuals for the enrichment of the family and society in its entirety. In Chinese, Japanese, and Korean societies, families will sacrifice housing, clothing, food, and other opportunities in order to educate their sons. It is a common belief that education will enable sons to attain positions of respect and/or wealth within society, which will then benefit the family clan as a whole (Short 915). Education is a privilege, often granted through sacrifice in these countries. In addition, teachers are treated with respect and honor. Lang Ngan remembers being a teacher in China. When he was sick, parents and children would send him cards, visit him, and bring him food (Ngan 92). He explains that as a teacher, his responsibility for his students at school was the same as that of the parents at home (Ngan 92). In these countries, children, boys in particular, are expected to perform well and teachers, not parents, retain the responsibility of disciplining the children and forcing them to learn successfully (Xie, "Parenting" 5-6). Parents contribute the money for the education of their children and monitor the success of their children from home, at times demanding that their children spend additional time studying class material (Xie, "Parenting" 5-6). However, the

school system does not demand that parents interact with it in any function other than paying the school fees.

On the other hand, the United States advocates a “high-involvement” style of learning, in which parents are expected to regularly express interest and involvement in the education of their children through meetings, fundraising events, sports events, conferences, and awards services. Immigrant parents have a limited understanding of the demands that the American school system places upon them and often simply do not respond to invitations to PTA meetings or required parent-teacher conferences. Moreover, with limited comprehension of spoken English and minimal English literacy, immigrant parents cannot help their children study for a science or history test, nor can they aptly monitor the success of their children. Many of these first-generation immigrants are overwhelmed by the prospect of providing for themselves and their children in the United States. Despite these complications, parents do try to insure that their children are doing their homework and attending school, though they may not be able to read the homework assignments or the messages from school authorities. In addition, many parents, such as Setsuko K., a Japanese immigrant and mother, choose to send their children to cultural schools, Chinese, Japanese, or Korean, in the evenings or on the weekends to heighten their awareness of their collective heritage (Chan 111-112).

Sue Jean Lee Suettinger remembers her excitement upon attending Chinese school. Both American and Chinese schools provided comprehensive courses – “history, science, social studies... geography,” language, etc (Suettinger 39). However, she explains, “Very seldom would I mix the lessons from Chinese school with American

school. They were two distinct worlds” (Suettinger 39). Through Suettinger’s words, the reader can identify Suettinger’s interest in the language and culture of her family’s heritage, but also her attachment to American culture. Suettinger locates Chinese school and American school as two entirely different experiences even though they taught the same subjects. While the perspectives of the two systems clearly would have been different, as a child Suettinger is unable to locate herself within either of those systems or even assert that one cultural perspective was accurate while the other was not. This example not only underscores the importance of a Chinese cultural education and an American education to Chinese immigrants, it also gestures towards Suettinger’s lack of concrete cultural and social identity. She is caught between the representations of both cultures, a common problem facing 1.5- and second-generation immigrants, which this thesis will examine shortly.

Despite the almost mystical dedication to education, the education of first-generation Asian men and women received in their country of origin is considered virtually worthless. For instance, Brave Orchid’s skills as a female physician are completely disregarded in the United States. Teruko Furiya, an educated and successful banker in Japan, depicted in the memoir Bento Box, becomes a seamstress and housewife in the United States. Though she speaks English fairly fluently, she is embarrassed by her accent and does not get a job at the local bank. Charles Ryu explains that some Korean PhDs cannot find jobs in their respective fields; instead they find themselves working as grocery baggers (“Traffic” 97). Ignoring the fact that their own educations have proven to be useless, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean immigrants

persist in the belief that the American education of their children will result in immediate success and upward mobility. Sometimes it does, as in the case of some of Brave Orchid's children; in other cases it does not, as in the story of Jing Mei, the daughter of Suyuan, in The Joy Luck Club. This insistence upon education, deriving from one of the reasons women immigrate to the United States, creates its own problems and conflicts between the expectations of the first-generation parents and the actual performance of second-generation children.

In addition to these significant issues – community, language, and education – are a myriad of smaller, but no less important problems that East Asian immigrants, and women, in particular, encounter. The first is recreating the tastes and aromas of their homeland. An additional trauma for these women is not being surrounded by the flavors and odors of their native country. Some even become obsessed with adapting and manipulating recipes to the foods available in the United States to remind them of home. While many men expect their wives to cook them dishes from their native space, many wives feel that it is their duty to pass on the essence of family experience to their children and their husbands. Tony Hom, a second-generation Chinese American, remembers that “food always seemed to be a central part of the family” (“Food” 153). The family would often spend entire days cooking in order to gather together and eat a large meal. Hom explains that this created a sense of community for his family members. In addition, the foods cooked were always traditional Cantonese dishes. As a result, the foods also reminded his parents and grandfather of home while providing a cultural basis for Tony and his sister. However, cooking cultural foods becomes

challenging when the right ingredients are not available, or are too expensive, or when the immigrant women are too busy to cook them.

Another important method mothers use to communicate cultural traditions to their children begins with conception as mothers speak to their children in the womb and follow cultural traditions to induct them into society and prepare them for life (Yunus 42). While it appears that women immigrate to the United States with every intention of maintaining these traditions, with the additional stressors of immigration, the sparse availability of cultural foods and items, and the sheer workload these women are forced to endure, these childhood traditions can be forgotten or overlooked. Tony Hom recalls that his mother would put out “a wad of napkins,” and “three Chinese spoons,” and “[pour] wine into three cups” on the Chinese New Year, but he never understood why (“Ancestors” 168). His parents never explained the custom and Tony felt that his family didn’t uphold any kind of religion. Rather, according to Tony, they just maintained a few superstitious customs (Hom, “Ancestors” 167). Setsuko K., a Japanese immigrant and mother of a thirteen-year-old boy and eleven-year-old girl in the United States, explains that she sends her children to Japanese school once a week, but that she does not keep up with her family customs pertaining to Buddhism or cultural celebrations other than Girl’s Day and Boy’s Day (K., trans. Lee 109). She explains that her “children are American” and probably would not understand the subtleties of Japanese cultural traditions (K., trans. Lee 109). She hopes that her children will continue to speak Japanese as they grow older, as she does not speak English, and that they will travel to Japan and like it. However, she finds herself unable to reproduce Japanese

cultural traditions in the United States. With both mothers and children suffering from a lack of exposure to the cultural traditions of China, Japan, and Korea, it is no surprise that intergenerational conflicts occur as children become more acculturated and parents feel distanced from their own culture and misunderstood by their offspring.

Finally, as children are acculturated or bi-culturated within United States culture, their orientation as individuals is called into question. Are they Chinese/Japanese/Korean or American? Are they Chinese/Japanese/Korean-American? Where is their native space oriented? Do they have a space at all? As these children are influenced by American culture through their education, friends, and the media, inevitably,<sup>11</sup> they begin to succumb to the individualist aspects of the predominant culture rather than the collectivist culture of the homeland of their parents which has been presented to them only by stories and mementos, not personal experience. Unable to identify with the China, Japan, or Korea of their parents' minds, they are left trying to orient themselves between the two cultures. Yearning for a connection with their parents, yet desiring personal success and independence, these children force their mothers to reevaluate the

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<sup>11</sup> As I began examining the responses of second-generation East Asian immigrants to their cultural identity, I fully expected to find that some individuals considered themselves Asian American, while others considered themselves American, and still others associated themselves solely with the native country of their parents. What I found was that all children, without exception in my readings, classified themselves as either Asian American or American. While a few individuals did long for a stronger association with their heritage and even journeyed back to China, Japan, or Korea to meet their families and experience the culture of their parents, they discovered that despite the attempts of their parents to recreate Chinese, Japanese, or Korean culture in the United States, they were not Asian. Rather, they were Americanized Asians at the most and wholly American at the least. The first-hand narrative "Traffic Cops," told by Lang Ngan and recorded by Joann Faung Jean Lee, strongly reiterates the points I have made above. Lang Ngan, a case worker who has handled over 5,000 Southeast Asian resettlement cases, has found that children and their parents are torn apart by American culture, particularly gangs and the educational system. The result is that children are always more acculturated to United States culture than their parents and are never able to identify themselves as wholly Asian. Other strong examples of this can be found in the memoirs Bento Box, by Linda Furiya, and Falling Leaves, by Adeline Yen Mah.

methods of child-rearing they performed in the United States. Indeed, Charles Ryu explains that the 1.5 generation, or immigrants that traveled to the United States as older children, teens, or young adults, find themselves to be “bilingual, but also, bi-illiterate” (“1.5 Generation” 50). He explains that they “are bicultural, but [they] don’t belong to any culture, therefore [they] are biculturally deprived” (Ryu, “1.5 Generation” 50). In addition, they are bilingual, but not fluent in either English or the language of their native country. While this is certainly the case for the 1.5 generation of immigrants, it is also true, to some extent, for first-generation immigrants like Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid and second-generation immigrants like Tony Hom, Sue Jean Lee Suettinger, or Brave Orchid’s children.

Clearly each of these factors – community, language, education, and generational disconnects – significantly affects the lives of East Asian immigrants. Immigrating to escape poverty and war, at the demand of male relatives, or to provide a better future for themselves and their children, these women find their dreams challenged and their hopes problematized. Alienated by a lack of community both inside and outside the home, immigrant women struggle to perform the same tasks that are considered their cultural duty at home. Trapped by a lack of fluency in the cultural register of the United States, to which their children are exposed daily, these mothers struggle to communicate both to their children and through daily interactions at work, shopping, using transportation, etc. Moreover, intending to provide an opportunity for upward mobility through education for their children in the United States, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean parents are often befuddled and sometimes thwarted by the high-involvement style of educating the

American public school system promotes. Finally, acculturation and the continuation of a foreign culture within the United States become problematic for both parents and children. As the reader can see, each of these challenges is an issue within both the public and the private sphere for these women. In addition, each of these issues spirals into a number of other problems that these women are forced to address. The following chapter will examine the various ways in which East Asian immigrant women respond to the loss of community, their lack of fluency in English, the new education system, and propagating the continuation of their culture, and it will chronicle the multiple problems that are created within each of these aspects of daily life.

## CHAPTER IV

### CHRONICLING THE DIFFICULTIES AND CULTURAL CONFLICTS OF EAST ASIAN IMMIGRANT MOTHERS

#### LOSS OF COMMUNITY

Every memoir, novel, and personal narrative I have encountered by an Asian American woman bemoans the loss of community produced by immigration to the United States. This loss generates two immediate consequences affecting motherhood: a lack of additional caregivers for children and the loss of a reinforcement of a collectivist identity for these mothers. East Asian immigrant men and women demonstrate their grief for a loss of community in a variety of ways. First, they create what Jean Lau Chin calls new or “false families” in the United States. If an individual is a friend to the family or perhaps from the same village or region as that family, he or she may be adopted as an “aunt” or “uncle.” In her book Learning from My Mother’s Voice, part of the Multicultural Foundations of Psychology and Counseling Series, Chin explains, “Our extended family and cultural practices made everyone a relative, uncle, aunt or cousin” (98). To solidify these relationships, families would visit Chinatown every Sunday, the only day off for Chinese immigrant families in Brooklyn, to visit with their new families in their own clan associations. These clan associations or fongs functioned as part of village associations, which in turn became part of district associations that were organized to help orient and provide care for new immigrants (Takaki 119).

In her book Asian Americans: An Interpretive History, Sucheng Chan explains that Japanese, Chinese, and Korean immigrants are more intent upon retaining cultural traditions, creating community, and preserving cultural continuity than any other immigrant groups (116). For these groups, clan associations served as yet another way of creating improvised communities in America.<sup>12</sup> They were usually established according to family name, something that could cause confusion and distress if a man or family had immigrated under a false family name as a “paper son.”<sup>13</sup> Chin remembers her own father’s deep insecurity and hesitancy as he joined the Lee family clan association, according to his paper name, rather than honoring the Lau family name of his actual family in China (108). During these clan meetings, members, predominantly men, would reminisce about life in China, talk about news from home, and recall their initial hopes for wealth and success in America while women and children listened (Chin 104-106). While these meetings provided a sense of community for men, women remained disoriented. In order to address this inequality, Jean Lau Chin’s mother, Fung Gor Lee, audaciously joined the first women’s association and attended meetings on Sundays (Chin 107). So great was Fung Gor’s desire for female community that, to her children’s great embarrassment, she would eagerly stop and greet any Asian face on the street, questioning strangers about their country of origin and experience in America

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<sup>12</sup> Clan associations were common in cities with a large Asian population – San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, Seattle – during the mid-1800s to present.

<sup>13</sup> During the Period of Exclusion, beginning in the 1890s and continuing until the mid-twentieth century, it was common for Asian expatriates to offer to sponsor Asian men to come to the United States by pretending they were a close relative. Once in the United States, a “paper son,” or a man that had become a “relative” through his illegal sponsorship to the United States, was beholden not only to his original family name but also to his new family name. This could create significant confusion and distress, particularly if the two families were rivals or enemies in the country of origin.

(Chin 97). In this way, these immigrant families expanded cultural traditions to create new villages and new communities in America based on their common heritage and experiences in the United States.

On the one hand, these concerns about community are oriented toward retaining collectivist culture and a sense of community to anchor these immigrants to their new home; on the other, the desire for community is very practical. Additional friends or “family members” are necessary contributors to a family income, business, or childcare network. For instance, in The Woman Warrior, Maxine Hong Kingston explores the importance of community by having the narrator point out, throughout the novel, the number of “aunts” and “uncles” that have no actual family relation, but rather have formed an alliance with the family to promote their mutual success. One such example is a “third aunt” who works with the narrator, her sisters and brothers, her great-uncle, and her parents in the family laundry. The narrator explains, “ ‘Third Aunt’ ...wasn’t really our aunt but a fellow villager, someone else’s third aunt, [who, along with my parents] kept the presses crashing” in the laundry as the family worked (Kingston 87). In Fae Myenne Ng’s novel Bone, the Leong family creates an interracial “family” or sense of community by going into business with a Hispanic family (168-170). Though this relationship fails because the Hispanic father cheats the Leong family, the overriding desire for community makes interracial families and even interracial dating acceptable, overcoming the strict social taboos of the countries of origin of these immigrants (Ng, Bone 112). Another example of work community making intermarriage acceptable can be found in Lisa See’s family saga. Her great-grandfather, Fong See, marries Letticie

Pruett, a Caucasian woman, after Lettie has worked in the See family lingerie business for several years. While the marriage did cause some social consternation, Lettie and her half-white, half-Chinese children were accepted and able to move freely within the Chinese community in Los Angeles both during Lettie's marriage to Fong See and after their divorce.

Community, however, is most important when it comes to raising children. Sham 'ah Md. Yunus explains that in Asian cultures children are usually not raised solely by a mother or a mother and a father; rather, an entire community – including a large extended family – takes part in teaching and caring for a child. In families with many children, older siblings may be given considerable responsibilities in the care, education, and entertainment of younger siblings (Yunus 41). It is perhaps here that immigrant mothers mourn the loss of extended family the most. In fact, Sucheng Chan explains that “unlike the situation in their homelands, few female relatives [are] available to help with childcare” (109). However, this loss is mitigated by three extensions or adaptations of traditional Asian community and childcare.

First, older siblings are given greater responsibility for their younger brothers and sisters in the United States than they are in China, Japan, and Korea. In The Woman Warrior, the nameless narrator relates the story of a Chinese American girl and her sister. The older sister is held back from attending school by her mother so that she and her younger sister will be in the same class. Their mother reasons that if they are in the same class they will be more able to protect and help each other. During school days,

the narrator notes that this practice is common among Asian immigrant families (Kingston 172).

The second way this loss of community is mitigated is through Asian families owning their place of work. In the U.S., Chan states, “the arrival of children [is] at once joyful and burdensome: joyful because family life is such an important aspect of Asian cultures; burdensome because a very large percentage of the Asian women” are working mothers (109). Though Asian mothers are just as likely as other immigrant mothers, if not more, to work outside the home (Takaki 475), they are more likely to work in a small business that a close friend or family member owns (Hopkins). In this position, the family business also becomes a place they can care for their children and a way their children can contribute to the financial success of the family. Rather than staying home and caring for her children, Brave Orchid, from The Woman Warrior, expects her children to come to the family laundry after school and work the machines as well as sew buttons and mend clothing (Kingston 87, 137). As one Chinese immigrant recalls, “If your parents had a business you’re going to stay around to help. You don’t even demand to be paid because it’s your duty to do so” (qtd. in Takaki 255). After spending several hours working in the family business, second-generation children seemed less likely to get into trouble. This adaptation of mothering not only reinforces collectivist values, but also instructs children through demonstration instead of spoken language, yet another Asian value, and prepares them to work hard throughout life.

The third extension of community is found in the place of work. Even mothers who work in Asian sweatshops or in Chinatown are able to create a place for their

children to come after school and be surrounded by members of their own culture. In Bone, Lei remembers visiting her mother, Mah, every afternoon at the sewing shop in which she works with other Asian immigrant women. Some days Lei and her sisters would work with Mah; other days they would play on the streets of Chinatown or visit the community squares where clan associations and older individuals would gather during the day. These adaptations of community mothering serve as an essential method of preserving culture and protecting children. Through these safe zones of community, the economic and social instability of Asian immigrants that forces women to work in addition to caring for the home and children do not separate them as severely from their cultural practices as it would if they were not able to incorporate their children into their workplace.

In Ross Parke's article "Development in the Family," he explains that the home lives and ongoing family life is preserved in many Asian immigrant families, despite the increased workload of mothers, because "the stability and coherence [of parenting] reside[s] not within individuals, but in the coordinated practices of the entire family. The interaction of the group... conserves relationships and regulates and perpetuates many aspect of ongoing family life" (qtd. in Parke 375). In this way, it is the interaction of the entire work community (rather than just the family unit, as would be expected in East Asia) that aids in the regulation and perpetuation of family and community life. Thus, immigrant mothers who are able to retain their connection to collectivist child-rearing through community in their neighborhoods or businesses are able to function much more successfully and contentedly in America (Jentsch 131-132). However, as

Charles Ryu, a Korean American minister, notes, the more acculturated families become, the less able the place of work and the work community are to act as surrogate parents (“Traffic” 96-97). When children begin negotiating the spaces outside of their parents’ world, the local community has less of a protective effect on them.

On the other hand, Asian families in smaller cities or in the country suffer more intensely from the lack of Asian community and are not able to use the local community as a caretaker for their children (Chan 110-111). In her food memoir Bento Box: My Japanese Childhood in Whitebread America, Linda Furiya recalls the intense isolation her Japanese family experience as they, the only Asian family within miles, lived and grew up in small-town Versailles, Indiana. Linda’s mother, Teruko, suffers intensely from the loneliness of her new position. Unable to speak English fluently, she has no friends nearby and no sense of community. Depressed, she sleeps for most of the day, rising only to make dinner for her husband and children (Furiya 285-289). Because there is no one else to provide childcare and paying for daycare would be impossible, Teruko works from home by sewing outfits and mending clothing while her husband works two menial jobs. When, after the Furiyas have lived for several years in Versailles, another Asian family, the Dongs from Vietnam, moves to the area, neighbors assume that the Dongs and the Furiyas speak the same language and share the same culture. This mistaken assumption highlights the indifference and ignorance of the townspeople of Versailles concerning their only Asian immigrant family as well as the separation of the Furiyas from local community (Furiya 180-183). While Teruko adjusts slowly to life in America, she is never truly comfortable within American culture and

seeks ways, including writing frequent letters and making Japanese dishes, to remind herself of her life in Japan.

An interesting lack of adaptation in childcare and community can be found in gender roles. Despite the emphasis on communal child-rearing practices, there are specific gender roles that Asian men and women follow in raising children, roles that are not altered even under the strain of immigration in households in which both parents are working. In his study “Urban Chinese Parents’ Perceptions of Their Strengths and Needs in Rearing ‘Only’ Sons and Daughters,” sociologist Qing Xie finds that Chinese mothers are considered the “loving nurturer,” while fathers are viewed as “the disciplinarian” by children (341). Traditionally, several women – mothers, grandmothers or older sisters – work together as the primary caregivers of the children of the family and focus on such activities as dressing, feeding, cooking, playing and bathing children (Short 920). Men, on the other hand, have much less involvement in the physical care of their children (Yunus 44); rather, they focus on the mental and social development of their children through playing with their children, teaching them or helping them study (Short 920). In short, in traditional Asian homes and culture, men do not aid in the physical care of children or the home. While on the surface the roles of men and women do not seem to differ greatly from the traditional American roles of mother and father, a few significant differences must be noted. First, multiple females of the same family or who work without pay are rarely available to care for children in the United States; second, the immigrant mother is more often required to work outside the home than the native mother. These two factors increase the stress upon Asian

immigrant women several fold; apparently, however, these additional expectations of women are not enough to pressure the Asian cultural mores of fathering behavior to change. As a result, mothering takes on a more important role in Asian immigrant homes while fathering is sidelined or ignored completely.

This cultural value is clearly reflected in all of the books I am referencing. In these texts, the father is almost a ghostly figure. He works, eats and sleeps, but his interaction with children is minimal. In Bone, Leon is constantly going to work on ships for weeks or months at a time to provide for his family. In Bento Box, the father works two jobs and is seen only at dinner or early in the morning. In The Woman Warrior and The Joy Luck Club, the fathers float in and out of the background, never making a definitive statement or contribution to family life; they merely follow the directions of their wives. In Listening to My Mother's Voice, Chin's father suffers from various psychosomatic illnesses brought on by the stress of immigration and lashes out at his family rather than supporting them. In Comfort Woman, the white preacher father dies young and only interacts with his daughter through frightening dreams and terrifying memories.<sup>14</sup> While it seems logical that men would take on additional roles in the family, as typically their wives are working with them throughout the day, they do not. Women are expected to prepare breakfast; take care of the home; work twelve to

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<sup>14</sup> Beccah actually writes a terrifying adaptation of the "Our Father" prayer to fulfill a school assignment to write a poem about her father. It reads: "Father/ who are dead in heaven/ because Mother wished it so/ hollow be thy name/ Father/ the black hole/ eating my life/ from the inside out/ feasting on whatever I feed it – / a platter of grasping fingers/ a snack of salty eyes/ the delicacy of tongue, still warm from calling your name/ Father" (Keller 131). This poem exemplifies not only Beccah's fraught relationship with the memory of her father, but also her difficulty in assimilating the spirit-dominated, Korean religion of her mother with the Protestantism of her late father.

fourteen hours a day in the family business, in a sweatshop, or from home; care for the children; prepare dinner; and clean (Chan 109).

Even after immigration to the United States, community remains an essential, though altered, aspect of mothering for Asian women. Though these women have lost the kinship of traditional family clans, Asian immigrants create false families and clan associations to ameliorate the trauma of immigration. Community also remains the cornerstone for childcare; however, traditional community, in which the female members of a village would to some degree “mother” all local children, is lost. In its place, older siblings take a larger role in childcare, while family businesses and places of work provide a type of communal after-school care. As would be expected, mothers who are able to create a sense of community and establish a support system in America are much more contented with their decision to immigrate. While the idea of Asian community is expanded within the cultural context of the United States, gender roles of men are not altered, despite the additional burden of employment forced upon women by the economic instability of these families. In reality, these women are not incorporating an American notion of community into their own conceptions of community; rather, they are adapting their traditional culture to their new surroundings, a tentative step toward biculturalism. However, they are also accepting the responsibility of working outside the home in addition to performing roles as a wife and mother, a noteworthy bicultural move that is outside the realm of traditional East Asian gender roles.

## **EDUCATION**

Asian parents are committed to the education of their children, both in their countries of origin and in the United States, as the means of attaining upward mobility. Tony Hom, a young Chinese American, explains that the education of children is a primary goal for Chinese immigrants. He states that his parents spent their entire lives in China and the United States sacrificing for their children, his parents “never went anywhere their whole lives. Their dream was always to save the money, send the kids away to college, do better for the children” (Hom, “It All Worked Out” 206). In turn, the children would reciprocate and care for their parents as they age. Tony Hom’s explanation of his own parents’ dedication to educational development does not differ from the traditional Asian expectation of education. In fact in East Asian, once children reach school age, they experience a jolting difference in the regulation of their care and time. Instead of being indulged, as they were as infants and young children, their parents become increasingly authoritarian (Yunus 44). These school-age children are considered to be small adults with a range of responsibilities and increasingly high expectations for their academic performance. As Yunus explains, the role of children “is to bring honor to their families by exhibiting good behavior, high achievement, and by contributing to the well-being of the family” (42). Indeed, one mother interviewed by Yunus considered her children to be their social security; this mother had performed her duty by raising the children, and as a result, her children were expected to support herself and her husband once they were no longer able to support themselves (Yunus 42).

In Asian culture, parents focus on preparing their children for school rather than participating in school functions. It is their duty to teach their children to have respect for the privilege of attaining an education (Xie, "Parenting" 5-6). Indeed, education is the most important factor of a family's budget; children, particularly males, will be kept in good schools no matter what the sacrifice of the family because academic achievement leads to social mobility and the success of the entire family (Xie, "Parenting" 5-6). A lack of talent or ability is not considered an excuse for poor performance; rather, children are merely expected to work harder to achieve (Yunus 44). As well, positive performances are not generally rewarded; rather, they are more likely to be met with admonitions to improve. Indeed, according to Xie, Chinese schools "give children a sense of purpose, accomplishment, and pleasure as they work hard and strive to achieve" (Xie, "Parenting" 6). With the interest of the children already engaged, for immigrant parents, it becomes the duty of the teacher to educate students, assign them homework and monitor their development (Xie, "Parenting" 6-7).

Charles Ryu explains that "Koreans are obsessed with higher education" ("Traffic" 97). Children feel that the only way that they will be able to establish themselves in the United States is with a university degree from an elite university. Ryu argues that most Koreans are over-educated for their jobs, making education a less effective means to attain success than it seems. Despite this, obtaining a university education remains the goal and ideal for Korean Americans. For Tony Hom's Chinese American family, the education requirements were clear. Tony explains, "There was always pressure to do well in school... We had to maintain the grades or there would be

corporal punishment” (Hom, “Food” 152). As well, it was assumed that he and his sister would attend college and establish themselves in lucrative careers so that in the future they would be able to care for their parents (Hom, “Food” 153).

In Bone, we see the educational system from the perspective of a second-generation insider. The protagonist, Lei, is a school counselor, hired because of her ability to speak Chinese and interact well with new Chinese immigrant parents (Ng, Bone 16-17). Lei notes the extreme difference between the educational systems in China and the United States and does her best to explain those differences to new immigrants. As she explains it, she uses the “This Isn’t China Defense”; she reminds immigrant parents, “We’re in America” (Ng, Bone 16). Despite her inner preparation and personal experience with the cultural differences new immigrants encounter, Lei never fails to be surprised when Asian immigrant parents insist that it is her duty, as well as the teacher’s, to instruct their children, control their children’s behavior and prepare their children for higher education. Even after Lei explains the differences in the educational system, parents tell Lei, “You’re the teacher. Hit them if they don’t obey. Scold them until they learn” (Ng, Bone 17). Meanwhile, the parents Lei deals with refuse invitations to parent-teacher meetings, the annual potluck, and evaluation conferences (Ng, Bone 16). In short, despite the traditional emphasis in the home upon schooling, the novel Bone reflects a common situation: Asian parents do not adapt to the American school system by taking an active part in school functions (Yunus 53). Rather, they continue to teach their children to obey teachers, but do not engage in

dialogue with teachers or the school system. However, they do try to closely monitor the success of their children (Xie, "Parenting" 6).

Despite general indifference toward school-sponsored or mandated parental involvement, Asian mothers and fathers still insist that their children attend school, focus on their studies to the exclusion of outside activities, and perform well (Ryu, "Traffic" 97). In Nora Okja Keller's Comfort Woman, Akiko, an emotionally and psychologically damaged mother, insists, despite her attacks of madness and her intense fear that her daughter will be polluted by American culture, that her daughter, Beccah, attend the nearby school and earn good grades. In response, Beccah attends school faithfully. Many days she leaves her mother in a trance or an intense dance with angry spirits, only to come home several hours later to find her mother engaged in the same activities (Keller 6-8). Beccah relates taking the phone off the hook and locking her mother in the apartment so that Akiko's employer won't learn of her madness and send her mother to a mental institution and herself to a foster home (Keller 6-8). It is Beccah who chases her mother around the apartment trying to get Akiko to eat something left over from Beccah's school lunch or to put salve on the wounds and bruises her mother has gotten from a day of fighting spirits (Keller 4-5). Though Beccah often finds herself in the dominant position in her relationship with her mother, Akiko does insist that her daughter attend school and stay in school. As well, Akiko does her best to monitor Beccah's progress.

Though Asian immigrants greatly emphasize academic success, in reality, these parents have very little real power to control their children's success. While in

traditional Asian homes, methods of discipline focus upon making a child feel shame or separation from his or her family, in America discipline becomes constrained.

According to Yunus, one powerful traditional punishment is locking a child out of the house. With nowhere else to go and without the approval or care of his or her family, children are quickly shamed into submission (Yunus 40). Another sociologist, David Nelson, notes that Asian mothers are very likely to use “the withdrawal of love” to manipulate children into obedience (557). Again, the thought of being separated from or abandoned by family is an ominous threat. However, the “preferred” form of discipline is physical punishment (Yunus 49). These punishments can range from a single slap on the hand or face to repeated hitting or spanking to a severe beating depending upon the perceived gravity of the offense (Yunus 49).

However, when the narrator of The Woman Warrior fails kindergarten because she is afraid to speak during class, her parents do not do anything. They merely have her start kindergarten again the next year though she continues to refuse to speak at school for two more years (Kingston 165-166). Indeed, what could they have done? They speak even less English than their daughter. In light of the continuing power plays between parents and children, the only forms of discipline the reader encounters are single slaps and shouting matches, a significant difference from the locking out of the house or beatings children in China might have experienced. Nevertheless, parents do seem to relish highlighting how terrible life would have been for daughters in China, from being tortured by stepmothers to being tied to anthills for disobedience (Kingston 46, 99). For children, this constant reiteration of cultural threats pushes them further

from the cultural traditions of their families. Indeed, the narrator of The Woman Warrior dreads the day her parents will decide to return to China (Kingston 190-191). The constant “threat” of returning home, consciously or subconsciously issued, lends parents an additional sense of authority because of their superior cultural knowledge and the possibility they will decide to return to an environment totally unfamiliar to their children.

In addition to the laxity of physical disciplines in America, traditional views of differing expectations of males and females with respect to education seem to have been dismissed by immigrant parents. A study by Susan Short reveals that in Asian cultures “sons are expected to maintain financial and social ties to families throughout their lives. They are also expected to provide care for their parents as they age” (915). Daughters, on the other hand, are considered less important, and, at times, less desirable, because they are expected to care for their in-laws, rather than their own parents (Short 915). In The Joy Luck Club, Suyuan and Lindo undermine these cultural traditions by pushing their daughters to go to college. Suyuan, Jing-Mei’s mother, presses her to succeed and surpass friends of the family with her school performance; despite this, Jing-mei does poorly in high school and drops out of college (Tan 153-155). Lindo’s daughter, Waverly, attends college, goes on to earn a college degree, and obtains a prestigious job as a tax attorney at Price Waterhouse (Tan 226). However, the traditional Asian expectation that the entire family will sacrifice to pay to send their children to school is not observed as strictly in the United States. In Bento Box, Linda Furiya performs very well in high school and hopes to get a scholarship to one of the upper echelon

universities in New York or on the coast of New England; nevertheless, when she begins discussing this idea with her parents, her mother, in particular, insists that she should live at home and go to the state university nearby to save money (Furiya 244-246). From these textual examples, it is clear that mothers encourage the achievements and successes of both their sons and their daughters, particularly with reference to education.

In order to combat the ever-burgeoning threat of American culture upon their children, Asian parents often decide to send their children to Chinese, Japanese, or Korean school during the week at night or all day on Saturdays in addition to American school during the day (Chan 111-112). Through these cultural schools, immigrant parents are hoping, as Aiman Wang explains, “to develop intelligent, hard-working children dedicated to the welfare of society” (3). In a strongly collectivist society, nothing else will do. In these schools, students are taught by their teachers to behave in a “prosocial” and “cooperative” manner (Wang 3). Nancy Freeman, an American educator, recalls powerful observations of prosocial behavior from her visits to schools in China. One of her strongest recollections is the limited number of toys offered a large number of students during play time. Rather than providing a toy for each student or permitting students to compete for use of the toy, both situations that might occur in American elementary schools, teachers expected children to work out compromises in sharing the toy with each other during play time (Freeman 81). In the essay “Learning to Value One’s Cultural Heritage,” Xing Chun Zheng recalls her elementary school experiences, at six years of age, in China. She says, “the teacher told us we should be unselfish. Two people would share a desk and take as little space as possible. So I

always wrote in a corner [of the desk]. After a semester, I couldn't write straight" (qtd. in Bystydzienski 88). These are simple, yet dramatic representations of traditional Asian values of the predominance of social and collectivist values over the independent, individualistic values favored by Americans.

Interestingly, cultural schooling, with few exceptions, is favored by both parents and children. Parents value the cultural education that children receive, while children appreciate learning and having fun in a safe, culturally normative environment. In The Woman Warrior, the narrator recalls her days in Chinese school as the most exciting days of her childhood. In Chinese school, children chanted lessons together and the shyer ones were allowed to recite their lessons privately to the teacher (Kingston 167). It was only in Chinese school, surrounded by other "half ghosts" or second-generation immigrants, that the narrator was able to express herself freely and feel confident in her identity. The narrator paints a vivid picture of the shocking difference between the silent and sedate Chinese immigrant children in American school and the same wild, exuberant children in Chinese school. In Chinese school, all the students "screamed and yelled during recess, when there were no rules; they had fistfights. Nobody was afraid of children hurting themselves or of children hurting school property" (Kingston 167-168). Jean Lau Chin echoes this sentiment in her book; she was jealous of her sister and brother who got to travel far across town five nights a week to attend Chinese school. She explains, "I would listen with envy each night to the stories my brother and sister told about the friends they made and the fun they had...Most of all, Chinese school was a place where we...had found our community and were no longer the exotic Chinese"

(Chin 102). While the students in Chinese school learned little, and many failed the same grade several times, they were able to experience a place where they were normal and fully accepted (Chin 102). For many second-generation Chinese immigrants, Chinese school became one of the defining experiences of their lives.

In Furiya's food memoir, the importance of cultural schools is seen from a different perspective. Furiya recalls one of the annual "family" visits that she and her parents made to visit a larger Japanese community on Thanksgiving. As Furiya and her brother play with other children, an older Asian woman asks Teruko, Linda's mother, whether her children are enrolled in cultural camps or Saturday schools to help them learn and preserve their cultural heritage.<sup>15</sup> Though Teruko makes it a point to share news of her Japanese family with her children, cooks Japanese food constantly for her family, and even takes her daughter to Japan, the Furiyas simply can't afford to drive back and forth to Cincinnati every day so that their children can learn Japanese customs. Upon hearing Teruko's explanation, the unnamed Japanese woman insists that Teruko should enroll her children in Japanese school. As the conversation continues, the woman embarrasses Teruko and insults Teruko's mothering practices in front of the rest of the Japanese families at the party. Teruko responds with a cutting and humorous insult, "I appreciate your opinion, and if you come and pick [Linda] up and take her to school, I

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<sup>15</sup> In *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History*, Sucheng Chan explains that Japanese immigrant families (as well as organized committees made up of Japanese immigrants) were particularly insistent that their second-generation "Nisei" children attend Japanese school so that the children would learn "their ancestral tongue [which would] enable them to talk to their parents, most of whom knew only a smattering of English" (112). The distinction between first-generation "Issei" and second-generation "Nisei" is particularly strong in Japanese culture. Issei are considered Japanese citizens or expatriates, while Nisei are considered Americans. However, Nisei children are generally expected to serve as mediators between their parents and the American world as well as to succeed in America (Chan 111-112). With this added emphasis on biculturalism, it is logical that a Japanese woman at a party would debate with Teruko over the importance of this issue.

will appreciate you all the more” (Furiya 123). With this the conversation ends. However, it is significant that the reader finds conflicting views among Japanese American immigrants as to how children should be raised, the importance of Japanese culture, and the priorities of Japanese-American motherhood.<sup>16</sup>

While education retains its importance for Asian immigrant mothers, mothers do not adapt themselves to the “high-involvement” style of American education. Rather, they continue to encourage their children to succeed academically from home while ignoring or misunderstanding the summons for parent-teacher conferences and invitations to aid in fundraisers. Mothers and fathers are limited in their ability to regulate their children’s achievements. While they can make declarations that their children must get good grades in school, they cannot tutor their children and fear disciplining their children too severely. In fact, discipline practices are not nearly as severe as is the custom in Asia because parents fear breaking the tenuous hold and sense of community that binds their children to them in America. This lack of power is ameliorated somewhat by parental musings concerning returning to China, Japan, or Korea, as their American-born children are terrified by the idea of having to learn to survive in their parents’ culture. While mothers disregard traditional gender bias and encourage their sons and their daughters to go to high school, college, and graduate school, they are not as fixated on providing the money for their children’s education

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<sup>16</sup> According to Chan, in the 1930s groups of Japanese Issei aligned themselves with three main schools of thought concerning the role of Nisei. First, children were expected to be a bridge between two cultures – living in both and succeeding in both. Second, children were expected to be “200% American” so that they would be more likely to succeed economically and socially. Third, children were expected to align themselves with the Democratic party and honor their working class backgrounds (Chan 117-118). Examples of the first school of thought are demonstrated most frequently in literature and memoirs.

themselves. Rather, they expect their children to take the best “bargain” in education. When possible, Asian mothers send their children to additional cultural schools at nights or on the weekends to mitigate the influence of Western culture on their minds, something they would never have to do in their country of origin. Surprisingly, both children and parents are pleased with the idea of additional cultural schools. Parents are reassured that their children will retain knowledge of their heritage and children are excited and comforted by their lack of exoticism.

## **LANGUAGE**

With immigration comes orientation into a new system of communication. While a lack of community can be crippling to new immigrants and a misunderstanding of the American educational system is troubling, not being able to communicate makes negotiating the immigration experience as well as mothering virtually impossible. It is widely recognized that young children are much more linguistically attuned than adults. While children can learn multiple languages rapidly and with ease, according to linguists, after puberty it is very difficult for most individuals to learn a new language and speak it without an accent (Fromkin 51-54, 374-375, 379). As Asian mothers immigrate to the United States, there are so many overwhelming cultural factors to address, that learning to speak fluent English seems inconsequential. However, this lack of fluency creates significant problems for mothers.

While children are able to learn English quickly and use primarily English in daily conversations, mothers rarely learn more than pidgin English and speak a Chinese

dialect, Japanese, or Korean during the day (Bystydzienski 26). In his chapter in the book Acculturation and Parent-Child Relationships, Kevin Chun explains that a significant source of family conflict stems “from ‘role reversals’ when children assume adult family roles and responsibilities because they are more proficient in their new culture’s language or possess more bicultural competencies than their parents” (qtd. in Bornstein and Cote 65). Through their biculturalism, children gain a distinct advantage over their parents. Not only do they speak the dominant language with greater fluency, they also understand American cultural norms and expectations better than parents (Bornstein and Cote 11). As a result, parents, particularly mothers, begin to rely on their children to perform daily duties that require English or take their children along to important or official meetings so that their children can translate for them (Bornstein and Cote 66). While examples of children serving as translators occur in all of the books I am referencing, the most extensive examination of this phenomenon is found in Furiya’s food memoir. In Bento Box, Linda recalls the lists of tasks her mother leaves her to do during the day. Linda speaks to the gas man and the phone company about incorrect bills, makes doctor and dentist appointments over the phone, and calls her father at work if there is an emergency (Furiya 206-7). While her classmates dare each other to plagiarize their mothers’ signatures, Linda always writes all of her mother’s correspondence, including detailed letters and Christmas cards to other families in the United States, as well as her own excuses from school and her brother’s permission slips (Furiya 199). In short, Linda takes over what Deborah Tannen calls the

“Communication Central” portion of Teruko’s mothering responsibilities (Tannen 139-141).

As a reaction to her additional responsibilities, Linda often expresses the anger and frustration she feels toward her mother, who, in her childish perception, is refusing to learn and practice speaking English. One day these emotions culminate into a mocking session, in which Linda and her brother, Kevin, make fun of their mother’s pronunciation of the word brownies. As they laugh, Teruko becomes angry (Furiya 204). The event ends with Teruko slapping Linda and ordering her to be respectful, a traditional method of discipline; however, a farther reaching consequence is Teruko’s withdrawal from use of the English language.<sup>17</sup> As Linda takes over Communication Central for her mother, she becomes more and more frustrated. She explains:

After a year and a half of [translating for my mother], I began to resent the letter writing and phone calls. When I came home and saw another list of phone numbers my mother wanted me to call, with notes scrawled out in her childlike handwriting, or found the writing paper and good pen waiting for me alongside my afternoon snack, inside my head I’d get hysterical. *Write your own damn letters! Make your own phone calls!* (Furiya 207)

There are several interesting observations to be made about this dialogue. First, Linda is defining her mother’s responsibilities as an American child would, not as a Japanese

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<sup>17</sup> A short essay by Jean Umemura, “Proud to be a Japanese-American,” part of the book Women in Cross-Cultural Transitions, clearly exemplifies this complicated relationship between first-generation parents and second-generation children. Umemura’s autobiographical essay also highlights the importance of education and cultural continuity for Japanese American families.

child would. Linda's position as public relations officer for the Furiya household (Tannen 141-143) enables her to call her mother's handwriting, and an aspect of her mother's personality – her use of language – childish, something that would never occur in a traditional Japanese home. Through this phrasing, it is clear that Linda recognizes her own superior position to her mother in this important arena. Second, Linda's intense reaction to her mother's implicit requests – writing paper sitting next to her afternoon snack – indicates that she resents her mother's assumption that she will acquiesce so easily. Interestingly, Teruko's choice to accompany translating requests with special treats is a traditional cultural indicator. Giving treats to her daughter is a way to indicate that she recognizes that performing translations is an unusual responsibility and is a traditional way to honor her daughter's additional participation in family life (Yunus 44). However, Teruko does not verbally explain her offerings and, to Linda, Teruko's actions seem to be blatant manipulation. Linda's internal screams emphasize her own perception of the unfairness of the situation; why can't her mother be a typical American mother? Why does she have to communicate to the outside world for her mother?

More extreme examples of intergenerational conflicts created by linguistic role reversals can be found in Joann Faung Jean Lee's book Asian Americans. One caseworker, Lang Ngan, recalls a time when a mother came to him complaining that her son refused to translate for her unless she bribed him. With no other way to communicate, the mother was forced to agree to her son's bribe – a new Sony Walkman (Ngan 90). However, after discovering the cost of that electronic device, the mother realized that she could not purchase it. As a result, her son left her alone in the subway

and refused to accompany her to the meeting for which she needed a translator (Ngan 90). In the narrative “Born and Raised in Hawaii, but Not Hawaiian,” Andrea Kim explains that she loved and honored her parents, who were of Korean origin, but is extremely embarrassed about her father’s poor command of the English language. She explains that her father “has a very strong Korean accent. Ever since I was a little girl, I have seen how people treat him because of that. They treat him as if he is an idiot. They would raise their voices, thinking it would help him understand them better” (Kim 28). In response, Andrea decided to never speak with an accent. Moreover, she attended Bryn Mawr to become more socially normative and avoids dating men who appear to be ethnically Asian so that she will not be treated “like an immigrant” (Kim 28).

Something that further complicates this frustration is that children of immigrants, while angry with their parents, also empathize with their parents and express anger toward the (predominately) white, native English speakers who refuse to understand their parents. In Bento Box the reader witnesses this phenomenon multiple times. The most memorable, however, occurs at the grocery store. While at the store Linda hears her father stammering and a woman shouting, “What are you saying!?”; following the voices, Linda quickly straightens out the situation while scores of customers look on (Furiya 208). As the woman behind the counter begins filling the Furiyas’ order, she says, “Your father kept saying, ‘Poke, poke.’” Then she laughs and finishes, “I had no idea that he was trying to say ‘pork’” (Furiya 209). Linda’s anger flares toward the woman as she begins mocking the grocer’s Midwestern accent –

“Whaad? Whaad?” – as well as toward her parents, who refuse to stand up for themselves (Furiya 210).

From these examples it is clear that the inability of parents to speak English becomes a double-bind for both parents and children. It gives children additional power in their relationship with their parents because they can choose or refuse to translate. Consequently, immigrant parents are forced to trust their children’s translations. As parents demonstrate their trust in their children through asking them to perform important tasks, a traditional form of honor in Asian culture, children feel overwhelmed by the additional burden of being their parents’ access point to the outside world (Yunus 45). A delicate dance is performed between parent and child, in which the parent is forced to use his or her child as a translator and attempts to reward that child for supporting the family with his/her linguistic skills and the child is bound to obey the requests and demands of parents but is also frustrated by the sharp contrast between his/her own experience of childhood as compared to that of his/her “normal” white friends. What is more, after experiencing the insults and disdain of white Americans toward their use of English and the embarrassment of their own children in the face of their verbal stumblings, parents become afraid to express themselves in English.

This fear of speaking becomes increasingly problematic as Asian parents commit themselves to speaking only their original language. As time passes, it is normal for Asian children to speak Chinese, Japanese, or Korean less frequently, if at all. Indeed, these second-generation children often cannot express themselves in the language of their parents and their parents cannot express themselves in English (Chan 112). Thus,

conversations are performed in a blend of languages. This cross-language parenting, performed primarily by mothers, has a variety of consequences.

First, children may feel caught between the two languages of their lives (and the cultures the languages represent) and find themselves unable to express themselves in either language. This is the case for the nameless narrator of The Woman Warrior. As she sits in the American classroom, she listens to those around her speak, but she cannot speak even when she is called upon. All she can think of is the dramatic difference between the written representations of Chinese and American words – the Chinese word for “I” has seven strokes and the American only three; which is correct? (Kingston 166-167). The Chinese female word for “I” also means slave, while the American “I” only has one form – a strong, defiant one; which “I” is she? (Kingston 46-48). As the narrator grows older, and remains silent both at home and at school, she creates a list of the things that she feels she must talk about (Kingston 197-205). When her list has over two hundred items on it, she “felt something alive tearing at [her] throat, bite by bite, from the inside” (Kingston 200). After she explodes and shouts everything at her mother that she ever wanted to communicate and felt restricted from saying by her bicultural confusion, the problem is alleviated, but not solved. In fact, the narrator finds that for the rest of her life she must say what she is thinking, no matter the context, or her throat will tighten up (Kingston 205).

Language problems are not limited, however, to parents’ interaction with the outside world and second-generation immigrant children’s inability to situate themselves culturally and speak fluently. Rather, the separation or gap between languages also

makes these Asian mothers feel estranged from their children, resulting in an imprisoning silence between the generations. While the nameless narrator of The Woman Warrior is uncertain of her own social place and troubled by the lack of communication between herself and her mother, Brave Orchid is confused not only by the behavior of her children and their accusations, but also by their inability to understand cultural cues.

When Brave Orchid praises the accomplishments of her children, showing off their “trophies...cups and medallions,” her children groan and leave the room (Kingston 129). When she expects them to sit and listen to the conversations between herself and visiting friends and family, they mumble and disappear “into the bathroom, the basement, the various hiding places they had dug throughout the house” including the pantry, closets, underneath the stairs, under tables, and behind doors (Kingston 128). To Brave Orchid, the behavior of her children is anti-social, abnormal, and above all, not Chinese. In fact, when her daughter tries to speak to her at night, Brave Orchid cannot understand her daughter’s motivation. She shouts, “I can’t stand this whispering... Senseless gabbings every night. I wish you would stop. Go away and work. Whispering, whispering, making no sense. Madness” (Kingston 200). Brave Orchid cannot see that her daughter is trying to form a verbal relationship with her.

While her daughter, the nameless narrator, misconstrues the many insults her mother has heaped upon her throughout her life as gestures of discontent and anger, Brave Orchid explains them as protection of her daughter from evil spirits. “That’s what Chinese say,” Brave Orchid explains to her daughter, “We like to say the opposite”

(Kingston 203). In Chinese culture, Brave Orchid explains, mothers insult the children they love the most to fool the spirits into thinking that their children are undesirable. If the spirits think that the children are undesirable, then they will not try to take the children away or curse that family with sickness, death, financial ruin, or disaster (Kingston 169-172). Nevertheless, Brave Orchid still feels that her daughter “turned out so unusual. I fixed [her] tongue so [she] could say charming things. [She doesn’t] even say hello to the villagers” (Kingston 203). Brave Orchid assumes that her daughter is able to read cultural cues and that her daughter recognizes that when Brave Orchid insults her, she is really complimenting her. Her confusion is as complete as her daughter’s. Because the intergenerational conflict is caused by confusion on the part of parents as well as children, it is virtually impossible to overcome and often leads to the estrangement of families and/or simple misunderstandings that last for years.

In Comfort Woman, mother and daughter are separated not by cultural misunderstandings, but rather by cultural shame. Akiko is born as Soon Hyo in Korea and lives a pleasant life there with her parents and sisters until after her parents’ deaths, when her sister sells her to pay the family debts. Soon Hyo becomes not a household servant, but rather a sex slave or “comfort woman” for Japanese soldiers invading Korea; she is renamed “Akiko 41.” Akiko experiences such traumatic experiences in a Japanese war camp as a “comfort woman” to Japanese soldiers that she is unable to speak for over a year after her escape from the camp (Keller 92-93). When Akiko finally regains her voice, she finds herself unable to reject the name imposed upon her by her Japanese captors because of the intense cultural shame that she feels; as a true

Korean woman she should have committed suicide rather than live as a disgraced woman. After she marries a white preacher and moves to America, she finds herself unable to express the truth of her life in Korea and Japan to her daughter, Beccah. Not only is she confounded by the depth of her own experiences and her own shame, she cannot find the words to say in English. It is only after Akiko's death, when Beccah finds a cassette tape that her mother has made for her chronicling her experience as well as experiences of others who are now dead, that Beccah learns her mother's true name and identity (Keller 190-194). Even then, she cannot understand all that her mother is explaining to her (Keller 193).

In The Joy Luck Club, mothers and daughters are divided by the inability of mothers to speak of their pasts in China. For instance, Jing-Mei is never certain of her own status within the family. A simple, yet vital question haunts her: is she her mother's oldest (and, therefore, most honored) daughter or did her mother abandon children in her desperate attempt to flee China? Once again, shame is a factor. Jing-mei's mother, Suyuan, remains silent about her past in China, despite her daughter's questions, because she is ashamed that she was unable to bring her first daughters to America. It is not until after Suyuan's death that Jing-Mei learns with certainty that her mother had twin girls, who are actually still alive in China (Tan 308). When a letter comes from her sisters, Jing-Mei cannot read it because it is in Chinese (Tan 309).

For these immigrant mothers and their children, language becomes not a single- or double- or even triple-edged sword, but rather an exquisite torture chamber. Unable to speak themselves, mothers must rely on their children to translate. As a result, the

power balance typical of Asian mother-child relationships shifts in the child's favor. Rather than being honored by the additional responsibilities bestowed upon them, which would be the traditional Asian response of children, these "half-ghosts" feel overburdened by their parents' inability to assimilate. Despite their frustration, children are also empathetic toward their parents and resentful of the blatant refusal of the dominant culture to acknowledge their parents' gestures towards assimilation. After witnessing their children's embarrassment at their limited command of English, Asian immigrant parents try to "save face" by refusing to speak English, which makes them even more dependent upon their children. Moreover, language difficulties prevent both mothers and children from orienting themselves within American culture while also inhibiting the intergenerational conversations that would facilitate mothering. Clearly, language is one of the aspects of immigration that most complicates Asian immigrant women's methods of mothering in the United States. Moreover, these women find themselves unable to embrace biculturalism in this area. The only way to be acceptable to their children is to do the impossible – provide economic and familial stability while learning and speaking perfect English and understanding all American customs. Even non-immigrant mothers are often unable to consistently provide economic and familial stability, let alone address and overcome racial and ethnocentric discrimination directed toward their appearances and accents.

## CULTURAL JUGGLING

### Introduction

For these Asian-American mothers, cultural juggling is a vital part and a constant challenge of mothering in the United States. Indeed, in his sociological review, Kevin Chun highlights the importance of family for new immigrants. Families, he insists, “play a central role in many immigrants’ lives by helping to organize, frame and make sense of their daily experiences” (Bornstein and Cote 63). Families create a lens through which individuals can orient their experiences, their culture, and their sense of identity. Jean Lau Chin explains that mothers are the maintainers, shapers, and purveyors of cultural values as they pass those values on to their children. With these ideas in mind, the role of the mother in setting a cultural tone is extremely important. How will these mothers pass on to their children their traditional religion along with important holidays and festivals, particularly with the cultural conflicts between verbal and nonverbal communication? How will they find access to traditional foods, specifically in rural regions, in order to pass on the taste of their culture and the recipes of ancestors? After all, preparing food is a universal custom and a commonly accepted way for individuals to access a culture.<sup>18</sup> Finally, how can these women maintain the traditional Asian norm

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<sup>18</sup> Serving and preparing traditional cultural dishes in a new cultural context is an interesting subject in and of itself. Recently several books, novels and memoirs, including Fried Butter by Abe Opincar, The Last Chinese Chef by Nicole Mones, and Graceland by Chris Abani, have been published that highlight the importance of food or include family recipes to orient the reader within the context of the book. It seems that for many immigrants, as well as fourth- and fifth- and sixth-generation Americans, food is an essential and exciting way to stay in contact with their cultural roots. For an interesting discussion on food memoirs, see NPR’s “Ruth Reichl: Favorite Food Memoirs”: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=11442341>.

of authoritativeness over their children when their children are surrounded by the individualistic American culture?

### **Continuation of Culture**

In the article “Childcare Practices in Three Asian Countries,” Sham’ah Md. Yunus explains that religion is considered an important part of daily life. As such, even infants are incorporated, as fully as possible, in all religious rituals and experiences (Yunus 43). Continuing in this vein, Yunus carefully catalogs traditional modes of behavior for Chinese, Japanese, and Indian mothers. Yunus discovers that in each of these cultures, infants and very young children are treated permissively (40). These children are rarely left alone, always picked up when they cry, and typically carried for most of the day, even after they have begun to learn to walk (Yunus 40). Moreover, their caretakers, generally mothers or grandmothers, teach them how to behave and how to perform specific behaviors not through words, but through demonstrations (Yunus 40). Personal care of the infants is very flexible. Infants are breast-fed on a schedule that accommodates the desires of the child. In addition, infants are breast-fed for well over a year within Asian cultures as breast milk is considered essential for a child’s growth and development (Yunus 49). Once small children have begun to learn to feed themselves, they are still fed often by their mother or grandmother in order to encourage tidiness, orderliness, and cleanliness (Yunus 49). Infants also sleep near their parents – often in the same room, if not in the same bed – to aid in the ease of care for caretakers and a sense of community and interdependence for the child (Yunus 51).

For these three Asian cultures, child-rearing begins at conception, not birth; it is the mother's responsibility to begin internal and vocal dialogue with her child while it is still in the uterus. In this way, the mother can begin shaping the personality of her child before its birth, not an insignificant burden (Yunus 42). Akiko in Comfort Woman, like many Asian mothers, begins communicating with her child as soon as she learns she is pregnant. Recognizing the confusion her daughter will experience as a half-Korean, half-white child in America, Akiko decides to alleviate that source of uncertainty early. As Beccah floats in the womb, Akiko tells her stories about her own childhood and prepares her daughter to be born to a white father. She drinks tea made of dirt in order to orient the soul of her child to the right place (Keller 113). She speaks to her child about the invisible, spiritual cord that connects them throughout life, even as a physical umbilical cord connects them until her child's birth (Keller 97). Akiko uses cultural traditions to determine the sex of her baby through examining her own chi, though her determination is incorrect; however, she is more pleased when her child turns out to be a strong-willed girl because a girl belongs to her more fully than a boy ever would (Keller 115-116).

After Beccah's birth, Akiko continues to observe all of the traditional forms of infant rearing: flexible feeding and sleeping schedules, holding and caressing Beccah for most of the day, and sleeping with Beccah in the room, much to the chagrin of her American husband (Keller 91). Despite the fact that Akiko has very little community of her own in America, as her only acquaintances are devoted female followers of her husband, Akiko boldly expands Korean cultural traditions by making it a point to

celebrate the many special holidays an honored son would have in Korea for her half-Korean daughter (Keller 119-121). In addition, Akiko joyfully explains these ceremonies to her daughter and her daughter grows up surrounded with a strong, even overpowering, sense of Korean culture, which helps her to combat the overbearing influence of American culture. Indeed, Beccah remains strongly attached to her mother, even after Akiko's death, because of her faith in the enduring cord that connects the two of them (Keller 212-213).

In Kingston's novel, the nameless narrator stresses the tension and confusion between herself and her mother because of her mother's emphasis on the use of nonverbal communication. An interesting result of the Asian stress upon nonverbal communication is that children are expected to learn cultural and religious customs through observation, rather than these cultural customs being passed down through an oral tradition (Yunus 43). Indeed, while families are living in their country of origin, surrounded by cultural cues and traditions, these customs do not need to be explained. Children can easily witness the preparation and involvement of their entire village in a festival or holy day. However, if a family immigrates to another country, this lack of the oral communication of tradition can become very problematic for both parents and children.

As we saw in the previous section on language, at times Brave Orchid breaks down and puts into words the cultural meaning she has been acting out. However, this is not Brave Orchid's preferred method of communication; rather, she considers having to plainly explain her actions and Chinese customs to her daughter a sign that her daughter

is not wholly Chinese – that she is a “half-ghost” or half-Caucasian – and that her mothering has broken down in translation (Kingston 203). Indeed, surrounded by forthright American society, the narrator is so far removed from the duplicitous/dichotomous Chinese method of speaking – speaking curses to protect blessings as well as performing actions to pass on cultural meaning and traditions instead using lengthy explanations – that she is entirely confused by her mother and her mother’s culture. Moreover, she marvels that China could have maintained a meaningful culture for 5000 years and posits the semi-ironic suggestion that her mother cannot and does not explain traditions because “maybe everyone makes it up as they go along” (Kingston 185). Ultimately in this novel, *Brave Orchid* retains her versions of Chinese traditions (adapted to American culture through use of American foods and alcohols) while her daughter chooses to be “bothered by ‘neither ghosts nor deities’,” believing that “Gods you avoid won’t hurt you” (Kingston 185).

Balancing the continuation and transference of religion, holidays, and festivals is an extremely complicated task and is unmitigated by the conflicting cultures surrounding these women. If mothers acquiesce to the traditions of the dominant culture, then it seems logical that their children will lose contact with the religious and cultural character of their heritage; if mothers try too hard to force their children to adhere to religious and cultural practices, then their children, unable to mitigate the forces of the two cultures surrounding them, may choose to reject their mother’s culture. With reference to this aspect of mothering, Asian immigrant women try to pass on cultural traditions through actions and may even assent to using a bicultural method of

explaining and demonstrating cultural traditions to their children, but their children do not respond in a consistent manner to their mother's instruction.

### **Traditional Foods, Cultural Comforts**

For some mothers, particular aspects of culture, such as access to traditional foods become paramount to their own survival in their new cultural context as well as a priority in passing down family tradition to their children. Linda Furiya's mother was able to use her re-creation of family dishes to orient herself within the United States and enable her to adapt to new ways of living. In Bento Box, the entire Furiya family, particularly the mother, Teruko, focus all of their spare time on developing ways to obtain cultural foods (Furiya 95). Frequent trips to Soya Foods, over an hour's drive away in Cincinnati, and infrequent, but necessary trips to Chicago to buy specialty foods are the vacations or highlights of the year (Furiya 94). In an extended passage, Linda recalls the time her parents received a letter from a Japanese family friend, Heiro Nagashima, providing them with a list of restaurants and grocery stores that sold excellent Japanese food in Chicago (Furiya 96). After Teruko and her husband debate the feasibility of traveling several hours to Chicago to buy food, transporting it home, and staying within their budget, they decide that the chance to taste the foods of their homeland is worth the cost. As every night for the next week, the family prepares a list of the foods they want to buy and what they want to eat in a restaurant, Linda recalls her mother's poignant inner debate. Throughout the day she would ask herself, "*Unagi* or *sushi*?" (Furiya 97). The delight of Teruko once she has found a haven of Japanese

cultural foods is incomparable; it lends her a sense of community she has missed since she left Japan.

Trips to Cincinnati and Chicago are not enough, however, to ward off Teruko's homesickness or to enable her to pass on the best delicacies to her children. As an immigrant, Teruko also regales her children and husband with bicultural meals such as Japanese omelets with ketchup or pizza covered with seafood, expanding upon the cultural traditions of home and incorporating the family more deeply into American culture. In addition to the family trips to buy Japanese foods, she has family members in Japan send enormous packages of specific foods, spices, and sweets twice a year to assuage her constant and sometimes crippling fear of running out of Japanese food (Furiya 86). For this family, the inability to recreate family flavors and traditions is the most maddening and isolating aspect of immigration. The importance of learning to cook a steak perfectly or create the ideal bento box is the way these parents pass down their culture. For Teruko, the pursuit of cultural foods is the pursuit and retention of her Japanese culture in America (Furiya 99-103). Indeed, Linda Furiya's commitment to this family tradition can be seen in her decision to write not just a memoir, but a food memoir, in which she continues her mother's method of perpetuating Japanese culture by including many of her mother's traditional Japanese and invented bicultural recipes.

Despite her interest in her mother's recipes and the long trip she takes with her mother to see her mother's family in Japan, Linda is hesitant to ask her mother about her life in Japan and Teruko doesn't offer reminiscences to her only daughter. Though Linda "had so many questions, good probing questions...that [Teruko] would have

enjoyed being asked, such as where the picture was taken and what she was doing at the time,” she simply looks through the photo album, in front of her mother, without asking a single one (Furiya 80). While Linda and her mother grow closer as Linda grows older, Linda regrets that she never learned as much about her mother’s life in Japan as she wanted (Furiya 80). Jealous that a close friend had discovered her mother’s uniqueness instead of Linda discovering it herself, Linda is too proud to ask her mother for more information and Teruko is too proud to give it. This conflict is not a problem specific to immigrant mothering, but one that can be encountered in almost any parent-child or grandparent-child relationship. The responsibility of mothers to pass down cultural traditions and personal heritage is a good example of the challenge of mothering and the impossible expectations of mothering in any society.

### **Rebellion against Collectivism**

Yet another challenge immigrant mothers must mitigate is their children’s resistance to perpetuating the standards of a collective society. In China, according to Qing Xie in his recent study, “Parenting Style and Only Children’s Achievement in China,” Chinese parents consider their children to be a form of property (9). As such, parents feel free to control the education, future occupation, skills, and marital status of their children; however, they emphasize that their goal is to enrich the experience of the family unit and they are acting in the best interest of the child (Xie, “Parenting” 9). If a child is not interested in science, but performs well in science classes, his parents, recognizing the economic and social value of a son with a medical degree, may insist

that he attend medical school and become a doctor. As well, along the way, they may provide a marriage match for him or demand that he take musical lessons to improve his dexterity for being a surgeon. In response, the child, no matter his age, is expected to willingly acquiesce. However, in America children are expected to be independent, to select their own careers and act based upon their own desires and for their own benefit, with little or no consideration of their families.

This contradiction between cultures creates a number of significant power clashes in the homes of Asian immigrants, in which children seem to have the upper hand (Chan 112). For instance, in The Joy Luck Club, Jing-mei drops out of college, despite her mother's insistence that she graduate, get a good job, and become financially independent, because she would rather be independent than fulfill her mother's pro-social goals (Tan 27). However, Jing-mei maintains a close relationship with her mother and worries constantly what her mother thinks of her and her achievements. In The Woman Warrior much the same thing happens when Brave Orchid and her husband begin considering setting up arranged marriages for their daughters with newly arrived immigrants. Their rationale is that they could benefit from the additional free help in the laundry and the immigrants would benefit by being connected to a Chinese community in the United States. When the narrator realizes what her parents are considering, though her parents never openly declare to their daughters that they are examining potential mates for them, the narrator feels the need to protect her future along with the future of her sister. Remembering the Chinese tradition that the oldest daughter must marry before the younger, the narrator, the oldest daughter of Brave Orchid, sets out to

make herself an undesirable candidate for marriage (Kingston 194). She begins failing school; she walks with a limp and makes disgusting guttural noises and facial expressions. She refuses to perform routine chores and when forced to clean, sweeps up spirits with her broom and breaks dishes (Kingston 190).

Surprised by her daughter's blatant rebellion, Brave Orchid isn't quite sure what to do. After some time, Brave Orchid and her husband give up looking for matches for their daughters and the narrator continues to live life her own way – still refusing to cook or clean or marry (Kingston 47-48). However, despite her resistance toward fulfilling her mother's plan for her life, the narrator expectantly waits to inherit “a green address book full of [the] names” of family members in China who ask to be supported by her family (Kingston 206). The narrator's excitement at the idea of bearing the weight of the needs of her family in China indicates that she is still firmly connected to her heritage despite her refusal to maintain a traditional cultural position as a dutiful wife and homemaker.

Chinese-American Tony Hom presents a similar example. A second-generation immigrant, he grew up surrounded by Chinese culture. His parents played mah-jongg on the weekends, smoked cigarettes, and cooked massive amounts of Cantonese seafood (Hom, “Food” 152). He attended college as was expected and works hard as a risk manager for a Fortune 100 company in order to please his family with his success (Hom, “It All Worked Out” 203). He grew up knowing that his parents planned for him to marry someone “from their particular village in Canton” (Hom, “It All Worked Out” 203). However, he defied family tradition by dating and then marrying a “lo-fan” or

white woman. Despite his defiance and his strong affiliation with U.S. culture rather than traditional Chinese culture, he plans to take care of his parents when they can no longer take care of themselves. He explains, “I even talked this over with my wife before we got married. I knew I would always take care of [my parents] regardless...[a]nd fortunately enough, she stated that we would take care of my parents when the need arises” (Hom, “Food” 153). In fact, Tony’s wife, Jody, is so dedicated to his family that she spends weekends that her husband is away on business trips eating “fish and rice” with Tony’s Chinese grandparents (Hom, “It All Worked Out” 207). Though Tony considers himself more American than Asian, he remains strongly connected to his family and honors the sacrifices they made in order for him to have a successful life and career in the United States.

The partial rebellion of second-generation children against the collectivist Chinese, Japanese, or Korean culture of their parents is in some ways the most challenging issue that first-generation mothers face. They first recognize that their children are not wholly Asian; rather they are situated culturally as part Asian and part American. Then, they realize that their children do not and cannot abide by strictly Asian customs within U.S. society. Finally, and with some or much protest, they begin to accept the bicultural life styles and life choices of their children. From refusing to speak Chinese, Japanese, or Korean at home, to declining to live at home during college, to dating individuals of other ethnicities, to living with significant others, to pursuing careers that do not traditionally result in large salaries or community respect, to marrying “lo-fans” and not teaching their children to speak Chinese, Japanese, or Korean, first-

generation parents do choose to accept these culturally untraditional choices of their children rather than permanently disowning them or living their lives without them.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

In Acculturation and Parent-Child Relationships, Marc Bornstein explains that acculturation occurs at different rates for different individuals. Members of the same family, even siblings, will have different levels of acculturation and different expectations of the culture-bearers – the mothers – of their families (Bornstein and Cote 5). Levels of acculturation are generally related to an individual’s exposure and involvement with a new culture; however, some cultural characteristics can persist, without change, over many generations (Bornstein and Cote 4). In her introduction, Bystydzienski explains that “women frequently have fewer opportunities than do men to become fully involved in the new culture. They often are expected to uphold the values and customs of their cultures of origin” (5). As such, immigrant mothers have an even more difficult job to perform. How can they adapt their child-rearing techniques to new cultural norms to maximize the efficacy of their mothering if they aren’t fully aware of those cultural norms? Despite these many complications, immigrant women do mother and they mother successfully (though, like every mother, imperfectly). While this thesis is clearly not a definitive study and cannot make sweeping generalizations about Asian immigrant mothering, as an interdisciplinary examination of the adaptation of immigrant mothers to changes in cultural surroundings, it can provide several general observations about the immigration of Asian women to the United States and the changing methods of mothering.

Through the course of this thesis we have seen the reasons women immigrate to the United States, the situations into which they immigrate, and the many ways that immigrant mothers address some of the challenges of mothering cross-culturally. Why do Chinese, Japanese, and Korean women immigrate to the United States? Like Asian men, they often emigrate to escape the poverty of their own country, political unrest, or war. However, they rarely have control over their own emigration travels. Typically they are sent for by their husbands, venture to the United States as picture brides under the orders of male relatives, are sold by male relatives into prostitution, or are tricked by men into emigrating. Their lack of control over their own emigration makes their lives in their country of origin uncertain and insecure. It also, potentially, makes them less inclined to emigrate.

Despite this uncertainty, many women, in particular Japanese and Korean women, maintain high hopes that life in the United States will permit them to have personal freedoms and grant their children the possibilities of attaining high educational levels and financial success. Unfortunately, once these women reach the United States they encounter more difficulties than personal successes. Rather than being defeated by their own cultural limitations and the racism and bigotry of Americans, these women and their husbands rapidly come to the conclusion that “the first generation must be sacrificed” so that the second generation can flourish (Takaki 443). However, first these women must address and conquer the problematics of performing cross-cultural mothering. Most of these problematics, including lack of female community and support, problems with language, a fixation on education and misunderstanding of the

American educational system, lack of cultural foods, the inability to explain orally the cultural traditions that are traditionally communicated physically, and the rebellion of their children against collectivist norms, are the result of the clash between Chinese, Japanese, and Korean collectivist cultures and U.S. individualist culture. However, some of the issues these immigrant mothers face, including the refusal of children to listen to their mothers, involvement in gangs, personal rebellions, and some misunderstandings between mothers and children, are normal problems for mothers and children that are exacerbated by the extreme cultural differences of first-generation mothers and second-generation offspring.

After taking into consideration the many issues and literary scenarios at hand, we may ask: how does immigrant mothering change overall? First, it appears that, with few exceptions, mothers do try to maintain their traditional cultural methods of child-rearing in the United States. However, they are often limited by their socioeconomic status or the necessity to work outside the home, the amiability and cultural familiarity of their surrounding community, their understanding of the American educational system, their linguistic ability, and their access to markets that sell familiar cultural products such as food, clothing, and medicines. Second, immigrant mothers readily accept some of the different cultural traditions of America. For instance, they eagerly pursue female clan associations and organizations to establish community; they disregard traditional gender biases concerning education, as both boys and girls are educated; they permit a laxity in strict methods of discipline and they encourage the bilingualism and biculturalism of their children. Finally, we find that, to some degree, mothers must adapt their child-

rearing methods and expectations of their children because the contradictions between the collectivist and individualist cultures are too great for them or their children to bear. Examples of this include encouraging children to attend American as well as Chinese schools, allowing their children to speak in English at home, and accepting the broader, more individualistic goals and lifestyles of their children.

Emphasizing both the sociological and literary aspects of immigrant motherhood offers twofold benefits. In “Heritages: Dimensions of Mother-Daughter Relationships in Women’s Autobiographies,” Lynn Z. Bloom relates: “A heritage is a gift from the past and a hope for the continuity of the future; as such, mother-daughter relationships are vital, important linkings of the generations, as varied as the women who comprise them” (291). This statement echoes Chin’s assertion that mothers are the purveyors and maintainers of culture. Thus, in the context of this subject, it is essential to recognize that mothering, in and of itself, is an extremely complicated endeavor, particularly with the exceedingly elevated expectations of the roles of mothers in society.<sup>19</sup> Under the bicultural conditions that immigrant mothers must face, mothering becomes an astonishing and awe-inspiring achievement that should be recognized and acknowledged by literary scholars, particularly those who focus on women’s studies, ethnic studies, and cultural studies, as an essential, though sometimes quiet, contribution to the development and perpetuation of multiculturalism within America. In addition, as the influence of mothers is vital and undeniable, a broader recognition and a more thorough understanding of the stressors and adaptations East Asian immigrant mothers perform

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<sup>19</sup> See Tannen’s *You’re Wearing That?: Understanding Mothers and Daughters in Conversation* and *You Just Don’t Understand!* for a broader perspective on this issue.

will prove invaluable for individuals who work with English as a Second Language (ESL) parents and bicultural students. Though ideas of how to address the complicated issues surrounding acculturation will always vary, cultural and educational organizations that promote bicultural mothering can emphasize not only the importance and value of mothers as cultural purveyors, but also ameliorate cultural transitions by providing advice, counsel, and readily available communities for immigrants.

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## VITA

Name: Christina Anne Ashie

Address: Christina Anne Ashie  
4511 Westray Drive  
Missouri City, TX 77459

Email Address: Christina\_07@tamu.edu

Education: B.A., English Literature, Texas A&M University, 2006  
M.A., Comparative Literature, Texas A&M University, 2008