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They Are What They Speak: Translating Language Uses into Ethnic and Gender Identities in Contemporary Chinese American Fiction

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how uses of Chinese—principally Chinese Pidgin English and code-switching—manifest as ethnic and gender identities in three Chinese American novels: Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), Weike Wang’s *Joan Is Okay* (2022), and Kathryn Ma’s *The Chinese Groove* (2023). It has become common in Chinese American writing to weave Chinese into Anglophone texts; however, with both the materials and the modes of incorporation continuing to evolve, the significance such bilingual practice simultaneously embeds changes. I argue that the specific Chinese expressions each author chooses, together with their writing strategies, signify a changing zeitgeist of Chinese Americanness, which I analyse along the axes of ethnic and gender identity. I particularly focus on how authorial realities impact the authors’ uses of Chinese and how these personal conditions constitute contemporary forms of Chinese Americanness. The first chapter takes its cues from Rey Chow’s terms “going native”, “the melancholy turn”, and “coercive mimeticism”, examining the use of Chinese as an ethnic symbol. I argue against viewing Tan’s employment of Chinese as a signifier of cultural authenticity and against reading her use vis-à-vis cultural authenticity. Instead, I argue that her Chinese usage articulates strong personal experiences and emotions. I then establish Tan’s writing as a historical and reception-based paradigm to compare Wang’s and Ma’s novels, pinpointing how their uses of Chinese differ and how these differences inscribe distinctive forms of Chinese Americanness. Chapter Two is modelled on Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, aiming to unveil the interpellative quality of both languages. I pay more attention to how the three female authors write back to the interpellative gender politics, especially how they utilise silence as a strategy to claim

their characters' as well as their own identities. This dissertation interprets the evolution of Chinese Americanness in Chinese American literary production by attending to writerly uses of Chinese and bilingualism. Linguistic identities manifest as ethnic and gender identities, and this is a dynamic process. At its core, this dissertation argues for Chinese Americanness as manifested through diverse language uses and posits its vibrant development, as will be evident in future Chinese American literature.

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Introduction: Language Varieties in Chinese American Literature

Chang-rae Lee in his novel *Native Speaker* depicts America as “a city of words” (327). The image is vivid, as the novel builds America upon the competing voices, from which one’s American subjectivity germinates. To belong to the city of words and to claim one’s subjectivity in the United States thus means to have one’s voice inscribed. Writers of different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds practice this by writing themselves into the U.S., primarily in its—not their—language, the American English. While the Anglophone environment forces these writers to “judg[e] the immigrant language” and teaches them “the local language”, the writers in tandem are “incorporating elements of the former into the latter” and “arguing about the propriety of doing that” (Rosenwald xiv). The American literature, it seems, has stepped against Theodore Roosevelt’s claim that “We must also have one language” and moves towards a multilingual status (qtd. in Crawford 85). In a chorale with the multilingual American literature, a large body of immigrant literature and scholarship has repeatedly examined the issue of language as an agent of one’s identity, culture, and citizenship.

When commenting on Hawai’i immigrants’ English use, Morris Young metaphorises language as “a sort of mask that can be useful in our lives, allowing us to enter into conversations and to explore possibilities” (423). This characteristic is especially pertinent to non-native English-speaking immigrants for whom knowledge of the adopted language grants them their livelihood. For immigrants, speaking the adopted language signifies much more than simply engaging in

conversations or securing employment; it underscores how much they have assimilated and become part of the local community. Ien Ang closely relates one's knowledge of a language to the authenticity of one's identity, arguing that language is no longer "just a personal problem," but also "actually a structural and cultural problem in society" with "political implications" (127). On the scale of the U.S. linguistic regime, English-learning programmes specifically established for immigrants, aimed at achieving linguistic assimilation, have been a vital component of Americanisation since before the 1890s. This process evolved from mild incentivisation to high-pressure enforcement embedded in the national education system, supported by state mandates: "In 1919 fifteen states decreed that English must be the sole language of instruction in all primary schools, public and private" (Higham 260). And although this linguistic Americanisation stalled after World War One due to the economic recession, the U.S. held that "[t]he sense of danger [that foreigners were national menace] was still vivid" (Higham 262), the stance promising the unsaid policy of the Americanised monolingualism. The promotion of monolingual Anglocentrism, however, inadvertently conjures the circumstance or idea of multilingualism as a way of resistance (Cannon and Koshy 773). Reality as well as literature have presented that most immigrants still speak a pidginised English occasionally code-switched with their native languages. Such a language viewed by the native speakers as 'broken' and denigrated, oftentimes segregates itself from Standard American English. This dissertation explores such a deviant, non-standard English and its impact on ethnic as well as gender identity formation in three Chinese American novels: Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), Weike Wang's *Joan Is Okay* (2022), and Kathryn Ma's *The Chinese Groove* (2023).

I read in comparison one classic Chinese American literature *Joy Luck Club*

with two other contemporary texts to spotlight the evolution of Chinese uses in Chinese American literature. Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club* has been an enormous commercial success. In 1989, its year of publication, the novel was reprinted "about once a week" and remained "on the national bestseller lists for 27 weeks—longer than any other work of fiction this year" (Streitfeld F01). Harold Bloom has interpreted Tan's writings as a returning to Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson, thereby placing her work within the American literary canon (Bloom, *Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club* 1). Just two years later, however, a different voice emerged. The Chinese American writer Frank Chin accused Tan of "so boldly fak[ing] ... all of Asian American history and literature" (Chin 135). Together with the novel's many favourable reviews, this stance has shaped *Joy Luck Club*'s reception to this day.¹ *Joy Luck Club* has been perceived as a cultural emblem, and the Chinese uses in the plots have largely contributed to such a reception—they act out as the agent of Chinese traditions, the representative of the East Asian exoticness. Such a reception meanwhile moulds a static pattern of thinking—especially among the western readers—that rigidly amounts Chinese uses in literary works to the *traditional* culture. I read *Joan Is Okay* in pair with *Joy Luck Club* to argue against this pattern.

Chinese uses crucially thread together the story in *Joan Is Okay*. The story also deals with the theme of ethnicity, but does so in a different way from *Joy Luck Club*: the flexible Chinese uses in *Joan Is Okay* do not abide by cultural codes but instead assert the protagonist's selfhood. The characters' uses of Chinese show how Chinese as their mother tongue shapes them as individuals—how they arrive at new understandings of their Chinese background, and how they navigate through the

¹ See Zhou, Chaobo et al. "Manifestations of Orientalism in *The Joy Luck Club*." *Overseas English*, no. 6, 2013, pp. 231–32; Wang, Li. "Representation and Contextualization: A Comparative Study of *The Joy Luck Club* and *Typical American*." *Comparative Literature: East & West*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2017, pp. 114–24, etc.

gender norms imposed by U.S. society and by their Chinese family. This personal adaptation of the cultural sign is also the author's claim to Chinese Americanness: departing from the Chinese American literary tradition in which uses of Chinese almost immediately signify fundamental Chinese values, Wang chooses to play with everyday Chinese speech. Her choice of Chinese materials, and the way she leisurely but appropriately situates them, speaks to her knowledge and sense of both languages, and not least to her position as a Chinese American at a contemporary moment. Reading together *Joan Is Okay* alongside *Joy Luck Club*, I propose, sheds light on the evolving notions of Chineseness and prompts thoughts on what such an evolution materializes, not only in literature but in a broader ethnic and social environment. Also a contemporary Chinese American novel, Ma's *Chinese Groove* nonetheless reinstates Chinese uses in a position where Chinese refers directly and exclusively to Chinese traditional values, echoing Tan's arrangement of Chinese. Meanwhile, Ma's use of Chinese appears to be relatively fixed: only one Chinese phrase (meaning hometown) is deployed to stitch together the whole story, which, as I will later argue, does not fully play out. *Chinese Groove* is thus an interesting case that provokes further thoughts: the way Chinese is used in the novel resonates with as well as contrasts *Joy Luck Club* and *Joan Is Okay*. Such a contested way, I argue, flags a contemporary moment in which Chinese uses serve more diversified aims and functions, therefore expand the notion of Chineseness/Chinese Americanness.

It is necessary to first clarify my definitions of several key terms in this dissertation. I focus on two linguistic phenomena in this dissertation: pidgin and Chinese code-switching, and I examine them on the axis of Standard American English, that is, I understand the two *linguae francae* as non-Standard American English. In this dissertation, Standard American English refers to the grammatically

appropriately used English in the U.S. I model the entailment of the appropriate use on Kenneth Wilson's introduction to his *The Columbia Guide to Standard American English* where he regulates grammatical errors as the inappropriate use ("for example, the uninflected dialectal third person singular verb *go* in *She go to school at Central High*" is Substandard [xii]). I also combine Peter Strevens's definition of Standard American English as "a particular dialect of English, being the only non-localised dialect, of global currency without significant variation, universally accepted as the appropriate educational target in teaching English" (2). While Strevens primarily focuses on Standard American English in English teaching, I accentuate its entailment of Americanisation. Hereby, I refer 'native speaker' in this dissertation to any individual of any ethnicity who is brought up in the U.S. and naturally speaks Standard American English. I define Standard American English and its native speaker to argue that in the context of immigration, they have "buttressed state-sponsored monolingualisms by...hierarchizing language communities[,] ...privileg[ing] descent, kinship, and belonging, setting the terms for inclusion and exclusion" (Cannon and Koshy 774). This monolingualism blatantly speaks against the American multilingualism cum multiculturalism, which in this dissertation denotes less "the factual existence of plural cultures [and races], each associated with a distinctive ethnic origin and all contained within a single societal frame" (Alba 8) than a performative slogan of "protest against social injustice and inequality" and assimilation (Segal and Handler 391). The American multiculturalism critically echoes Charles Taylor's "politics of recognition" in the aspect that the cultural majority recognises the equal worths of other cultural minorities via "unsufferable patronizing" and "condescension" (70).

It is therefore not surprising that different immigrants' English pidgins have

become “a staple of American humor” and have been mocked in American literature (Kim 12). Among these non-standard linguistic forms, Chinese English pidgin, characterised by high-pitched sing-song tones and tortured syntax, has been represented in ways that mischaracterise the actual Chinese English pidgin (12). Pidgin was initially used as literary material by white American writers to create a sense of farce, provoking the white audience to “feel... superiority to see these queer little specimens of petrified progress” and degrade the Chinese American image—Bret Harte’s “The Heathen Chinese” (1870) and Charles G. Leland’s *Pidgin English Sing-Song* (1903) serve as examples (Bancroft 309). Even Chinese American writers themselves² criticised the immigrants’ faulty English, due to which, as they contended, many a misunderstanding had been caused (Yee 198). Code-switching, broadly defined as “the ability on the part of bilinguals to alternate effortlessly between their two languages”, presumes the speaker’s capability in using at least one of the two languages (Bullock and Toibio 1). In this dissertation, code-switching designates the linguistic situations where the authors substitute Chinese for English—oftentimes only a phrase or two in a single sentence—to express certain specific ideas.

Literature Review

Pidgin and Code-switching in Chinese American Literature

Widely used in immigrant literature, pidgin and code-switching have also

² For example, Betty Lee Sung, Chiang Yee.

become common literary techniques in Chinese American writings. Scholarly responses to such uses generally fall into two contrasting camps: one that appreciates their multicultural benefits, and the other that disapproves of their implied Orientalism or their assent to assimilationism. Pidgin and code-switching's immediate effect is often to evoke linguistic realism, as Steven Sondrup argues that Chinese American pidgin in *Joy Luck Club* "provides the effect of the real" (38), and Bi-ling Chen claims that it can even further "add to the emotional authenticity" (74). Another aspect where pidgin and code-switching earn attention and appraisal is that they can promote multiculturalism. Juan Li, for example, credits Maxine Hong Kingston's use of pidgin and code-switching in *Tripmaster Monkey* (1987) for giving "the flexibility and richness necessary to express the multiple dimensions and states of consciousness in the Chinese American community" (271), through which she "inscribes her multicultural consciousness" (285). Holly Martin regards the ethnic writers' code-switching as "a conscious decision to create a desired effect and to promote the validity of authors' heritage languages" (404). She continues to argue that code-switching "strengthens the tie between the author's work and the heritage culture, making that culture more accessible to the reader" (411). The advocacy for pidgin and code-switching forms a choir with Werner Sollers's emphasis on the acceptance of other languages in the U.S., which

mean[s] a further strengthening of English as the public language and a clearer understanding of language rights of minorities (and thus be likely to reduce social conflicts), bringing about a higher degree of literacy in English as well as more bilingual and multilingual fluency for everybody.
(3)

As these likely-minded scholars argue, the immigrants' linguistic status sets Standard American English in motion, which thereby "destabilizes what is considered to be the domain of English within the political economy in which the novel circulates: the

privileged American cultural realm, the nation-state of the United States” (Nubla 212). The multilingual techniques serve as a critique of the Anglo-American cultural hegemony while also promoting a vision of multiculturalism (202).

In her examination of Jewish immigrant English in Anzia Yeziarska’s *Hungry Hearts*, Delia Caparoso Konzett emphasises immigrants’ resourcefulness in “restor[ing] linguistic and cultural agency” (599). By speaking a pidgin English, Konzett argues, Jewish immigrants practise a double writing and an “act of cultural translation” in Homi Bhabha’s sense where such a practice does not necessarily indicate their preservation of the old tradition and culture but the emergence of a new hybridity (qtd. in Konzett 614). The new hybridity connotes the construction and creation of “a body of knowledge about their [the immigrants’] individual and collective Self, their history, and their culture—in relation to themselves and to the dominant society around them” (Okawa 192). The scholars who endorse the multilingual stance in Chinese American writings argue for the similar contribution such a stance has made and argue that multilingualism can justify and re-justify the definition of multiculturalism.

Despite the fact that Werner Sollers has a benign endorsement for the multicultural U.S., he aligns Standard American English with other languages—i.e. other languages should be made public so that they can better serve English, instead of having their own linguistic authority—as Taryn Kiana Myers argues “[t]he practices of code-switching...is the foundation of assimilation into White American culture” (113). The core value of Sollers’ contention still privileges Standard American English as a common national language, which paradoxically contrasts with his promotion of multiculturalism, leaving it only as a myth. The American multiculturalism, manifested in “the melting pot ideal”, “requires the submergence

of one's cultural roots to gain access to the promise of America" (Myers 113). On pidgin and code-switching uses in Chinese American literary texts, critics often extend their debates to authenticity and self-Orientalism, because such uses are frequently seen as "the product of the American born writer's own heavily mediated understanding of things Chinese" which only *appears* to be authentic and authoritative (S. Wong 181). In her examination of the "implausible" pidgin and code-switching in Tan's works, Sau-ling Wong questions Tan's author's cultural authority because Tan's faulty Chinese uses only gloss over linguistic accuracy. Tan's gesture, as S. Wong insists, is a self-Orientalist stance only to invite trust so that she can serve the "comforting presence of cultural mediation to the 'mainstream' reader" (189). Similarly, Sheng-mei Ma charges Tan's inauthentic use of Chinese with displaying a linguistic exoticism that could only stem from an outsider's ears, which distances Tan herself from the ethnic Chinese group as she constructs her own American self. Tan's concoction of Chinese is thus to S. Ma a malpractice "calculated to bring forth a fictional universe at once aesthetic and abominable, at once uplifting and degrading, in the exact Orientalist form" (S. Ma, "'Chinese and Dogs'" 41). The self-Orientalist form, according to S. Ma, further bespeaks the author's self-hatred (S. Ma, "Orientalism" 104).

At the core of their critiques, S. Wong, S. Ma and like-minded critics blame authors like Tan for being too westernised ergo too inauthentic. Notwithstanding that the Chinese writers' birth and growth in American have *de facto* westernised them, to moralistically charge them of being too westernised, I contend, can be devastating, because the charge can signal a dichotomous attempt on the part of specialists in Chinese culture—which is also the American-born Chinese writers' culture—"to demolish the only premise" on which these authors can speak (Chow,

Women and Chinese Modernity 355). By pointing out this, I am not arguing against the necessity of cultural authenticity but suggesting that the cultural authenticity should not become the criterion of who can speak for Chinese and Chinese Americans. There are indeed scholars who see the misuses of Chinese and pidgin as creative and reinterpret the misuses as unique marks of the Chinese American identity. In her discussion of Asian American poetry, Tara Fickle demonstrates that Asian American writers' innovative uses of English can be treated as "language games [that] challenge normative assumptions about the relationship between language, literature, and identity" ("English before Engrish" 78) thereby turning the language misuses into "instrumental sites for the contemporary articulation of a national (here, the U.S.) sovereignty that is increasingly being defined as, and through, linguistic sovereignty" (84). Cathy Park Hong also proudly declares: "bad English is my heritage...to other English is to make audible the imperial power sewn into the language, to slit English open so its dark histories slide out" (97). Fickle's and Hong's viewpoints shift the focus from issues of authenticity to language ownership: the question becomes less about whether Asian American writers can use language correctly but more about whether they *choose* to do so and how they choose to do so.

The Joy Luck Club, Joan Is Okay, and The Chinese Groove

The critiques of *Joy Luck Club* are plentiful, most of which are thematic readings attentive to—but also limited by—racial resistance. The critical concern of language *per se* as the conduit of themes such as assimilation and resistance has only been touched upon in passing. Although Sondrup in his article gives a close

examination of the use of Chinese in Tan's text, his reading, as he himself candidly states, only "fulfils all of the immediate expectations" (36) of him as "a Danish American male" that the pidgin and inserted Chinese have made the text more authentically Chinese (42). For scholars of Chinese descent, Tan's faulty uses of Chinese language and awkward pidgin English incur harsh receptions. Frank Chin, showing his strong feeling about this, inveighs against Tan's inauthentic and misandrist treatment of Chinese culture and describes Tan's work only to be "not Chinese but white racist" fake work which breeds more fake work (Chin 134-35). Chin's criticism has influentially framed other ethnic Chinese scholars, such as S. Wong's criticism on Tan's self-Orientalism. Patricia Chu does not go as far as to claim that Tan's writing is Orientalist but still finds the pidgin in the text too deliberate: "And, since this is an *internal* monologue [by Ying Ying] presumably conducted in Chinese rather than English, why should it be represented in ersatz pidgin English?" (159, original emphasis). Besides the fact that these critics, expertise in Chinese language and culture thus know them better than Tan and thus feel the need to proofread Tan's use of Chinese, their criticism is their disappointment that Tan has failed to fulfil their expectations as a Chinese descendant whose evaluation criteria for Chinese ethnic literature prioritise authenticity and reliability. Their reading, therefore, shares Sondrup's "assumption of the [cultural and ethnic] compatibility" (Adams 94)—must a writer of colour be a cultural insider?

Compared with *Joy Luck Club*, the two contemporary novels *Joan Is Okay* by Weike Wang and *The Chinese Groove* by Kathryn Ma have not been significantly researched. *Joan Is Okay* is primarily written in Standard American English with sparse Chinese code-switching. The rendition, according to Wang, is more realistic:

because the protagonist Joan is bilingual, and she thinks in both English and in Chinese (Wu “Science, Fiction”). In *Chinese Groove*, one Chinese phrase *lao jia*—the hometown, the old family compound—recurs and thematically weaves together the novel, inviting explorations of this specific Chinese use. Additionally, K. Ma in an interview mentions she writes the book to explore the themes of language and communication (Rapkin “First Draft – Kathryn Ma”), which further validates my examination of code-switching in *Chinese Groove*.

As reviewed above, pidgin and code-switching in Asian American literature have been widely studied, with scholarly conclusions generally oscillating between multicultural and Orientalist perspectives. I narrow my focus from Asian American literature to Chinese American novels, and from a broad array of pidgin English forms to Chinese pidgin English and Chinese code-switching, as along with Chinese Americans forming the major immigrant community in the U.S. and significantly shaping the nation’s demography, Chinese and Chinese pidgin English have markedly hybridised American English. Within such a scope, I focus on a slightly different aspect: the authorial truths unveiled by the three authors’ language uses. Incontrovertibly, their language choices reflect their characters’ identity formation, but the fictional identity is essentially forged by the three authors. What have they projected to their characters’ by inscribing multilingual composition? And what does this projection speak to the larger U.S. linguistic and ethnic context? I aim to answer these questions in the first chapter.

The second chapter examines how, while neither English nor Chinese per se is inherently gendered, both languages operate in the three novels to negotiate racialised gender stereotypes. I focus on gender-inflected linguistic variation in the

three Chinese American literary texts. The 1970s saw Chinese American literati—mainly men—seek to dismantle the “temporary sojourners” image and fashion a new one (Kim 175). Within this project of self-imaging, ethnicity and gender never stand independently of each other. As S. Wong notes, “Ethnicity is, in some sense, always already gendered, and gender always already ethnicised” (“Ethnicising Gender” 126). The observation is especially apt for the 1970s image-seeking male literati—Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Shawn Wong—who equate Chinese Americanness with Chinese American manhood (Kim 175). Chinese Americanness and gender are interconnected, intersecting, and mutually constitutive, since Chinese immigrants’ gender and sexuality constitute “one of the primary terms through which one’s ethnic identity is understood, experienced, and structured” (114). Particularly in Chinese American literature, “the characters’ actions, depicted along a spectrum of gender appropriateness, are assigned varying shades of ‘Chineseness’ or ‘Americanness’ to indicate the extent of their at-homeness in the adopted land” (115).

The debate over gender and its modes of presentation in Chinese American literature crystallised around Chin’s and Kingston’s polemics concerning Asian American manhood and womanhood. Chin is most incensed by the castrated and effeminate image of Chinese American men—“white America is ... securely indifferent about us as men,” and Chinese American men have become “the white male’s dream minority ... essentially feminine in character” (Chin and Chan 66)—with “feminine” there denoting “lacking daring, originality, aggressiveness, vitality” (68). Chin and Chan’s sexism within racism has, as Spivak would put it, pushed “the subaltern as [Chinese American] female ... even more deeply in shadow” (Spivak 41), where women can be triply oppressed by racism, sexism, and intra-ethnic patriarchy.

Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976) addresses this sexist impasse. With sexism as "the primary question in her own consciousness" (Kim 199), Kingston's protagonist struggles to define herself as a Chinese American woman amid triple oppression. Owing to the novel's wide acclaim, "the woman warrior" became a byword for Chinese American feminist writing. Even beyond the Asian American literary realm, the book generated "a veritable industry of critical analysis" and enjoyed "phenomenal popularity with white feminist readers" (S. Wong and Santa Ana 194). *Woman Warrior* inaugurated a phase in which Chinese American women writers write back to sexism, and the publication of *Joy Luck Club* reignited mainstream feminist attention. The two novels' focus on oppressed Chinese women and on mother-daughter relationships "establish[es] a matrilineal tradition" in Chinese American women's literature, counterbalancing the masculine and patriarchal discourse prior to the 1970s (195). As Lisa Lowe remarks, "in the 1990s, we can afford to rethink the notion of ethnic identity in terms of ... gender differences" (271). The powerful feminist reception of these two novels has sometimes led readers—especially white American readers—to treat them as synonymous with Asian American women's writing. Further, the gendered orders on both sides are frequently mediated through language: Chinese (and stories tied to China) are often configured as masculine and sexist, while English—though hardly a site of full equality—is figured as a vehicle of freedom that can, to some extent, release female characters from Chinese patriarchy.

In this regard, Chinese American women's writing seems to designate China as masculine and the U.S.—not exactly feminine, but more liberally feminist. Such a designation interestingly counterposes China's passive otherness, a quality idealized by the U.S. as feminine. Chow directly contends that the West sees China "as a

spectacle ... this China becomes, in its relations to the West, ‘woman,’” an Other onto which “the unthinkable, that which breaks limits of civilized imagination, is projected” (*Women and Chinese Modernity* 351). She traces “China as a woman” back to Julia Kristeva’s *About Chinese Women* (1974) and argues that, even though Kristeva looks with sympathy, she nevertheless repeats a metaphysics that others and feminizes China by claiming that Chinese women are “negative to the time of history and cannot ‘be’” (7). One strand of Kristeva’s attribution of “negative femininity” to China is her suggestion that Chinese, by preserving primordial tones of a “psychic stratum” that is “pre-Oedipal,” “pre-syntactic,” “pre-Symbolic,” is a “maternal,” feminine language (Kristeva 55). Chow disagrees, reading Kristeva’s move as further feminising and thus othering China. I concur with Chow that Kristeva’s analysis is questionable, but for a different reason: the gendering of Chinese as a language does not align consistently with the gendered perception of its speech community or speaking country. I therefore bring in Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity to elaborate this point.

I argue that Chinese is not an essentially gendered language, and that the gender dynamics it represents are determined by the contents and contexts it carries. As the counterpart to a feminised China, the U.S. advertises its “enriching access to a ... heritage of protofeminist individualism and enterprise” (Chu 168). In this sense, American English, as a conduit of freedom, is often taken to be at least a language that embodies feminism. Nevertheless, Chow sharply notes that “vis-à-vis the non-Western woman, the white woman occupies the position ... as investigator with ‘the freedom to speak’” (*Women and Chinese Modernity* 356), while non-Western women—here, specifically Chinese women—remain muted, their access to free speech foreclosed. I am in line with Chow, but I do not claim that English and the

U.S. invariably entail subjugation; my point remains tethered to the dynamic gender relations attached to both languages. I explain these dynamics through the lens of gender performativity: Butler theorises gender as performatively constituted under ideological interpellation, and I therefore link language, gender, and interpellation. More specifically, I treat language as one concrete medium of governing ideology that surveils gender performance; thus, to speak a language is to participate in the interpellative gender politics. In the three texts discussed here, the protagonists navigate between English and Chinese—thereby between American and Chinese ideologies—so that speaking either language inevitably hails the ideology attached to it. In Chapter 2, I analyse how language fabricates Chinese American gender identity through such interpellation.

Chinese American writing also foregrounds the power relations between silencing and breaking silence: the powerful, oppressive side tends to silence the weak, while the weak rise up and resist through their need and willingness to speak. Asian American communities' struggles for voice have underpinned their flourishing across fields, and 1991 was, as S. Wong remarks, "something of an annus mirabilis for Asian American writing" (*Reading Asian American Literature* 3). By this time, the silence that had painfully shaped Asian Americans and their literature "has ended in a burst of voices as Asian Americans—long successful in fields such as medicine, engineering and business—are making their mark in the literary world" (Solovitch 18). The tradition of Chinese American silence is deeply rooted: the "paper sons" had to "hide their names; sojourners take new names when their lives change and guard their real names with silence" to evade identity investigation (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 5). Layered upon this, some Chinese wish to erase the past by severing ties to China, as Maxine's father's muteness exemplifies: "No stories. No

past. No China” (14); likewise, Amy Tan recalls in interview that her parents did not really talk about China (“Asia Society at the Movies”).

In addition to the collective battle against silence, there are active and persistent fractures within the community regarding silence and gender. Chin’s rebukes of silence are forceful, not only because he regards breaking silence as countering “[o]ne measure of the success of white racism” but also because “[t]he deprivation of language ... has contributed ... to the lack of a recognised style of Asian American *manhood*” (Chin et al., xxxviii, my emphasis). For Chin, to be silenced is to be castrated and feminised, whereas to voice oneself as a Chinese American subject is to ‘be a man’. Within this logic, however, Chinese American women are again positioned as a ‘minority within a minority’ and face a double challenge in breaking silence: external racism and internal, intra-ethnic sexism. While the Chinese American man is expected to reassert language and the right to speak, the Chinese American woman is expected to remain quiet and reticent—without a personality of her own—so that she may be easily moulded “in every way, every day ... to be trouble-free, unobtrusive, quiescent, cooperative” (J. Wong, 17). Such enforced muteness flattens women’s personhood and reduces their thought to “hopeless inarticulateness” (Kim 204).

Nonetheless, even the notion of silence is gendered and hierarchical. There are occasions when men weaponise silence, which “manifest[s] itself as the suppression of an Asian past” and the sealing of their emotions (Cheung 9). In *China Men* (1980), Kingston’s narrator addresses her father’s deliberate silence following his day-long shouting and cursing; the reason remains unexplained: “Worse than the swearing and the nightly screams were your silences when you punished us by not talking. You rendered us invisible, gone... We invented the terrible things you were

thinking... That you hate daughters. That you hate China” (14). The father’s silence here operates as punishment; he refuses to speak with his female family members, insulating them as the marginalised other. Worse for the women, this silence is a psychological punishment that intensifies their anxiety and frustration. In response, Chinese American women writers produce female characters who are compelled to tell their stories (for example, Maxine’s outburst to her mother in *Woman Warrior*; An-mei learning to shout in *Joy Luck Club*; Jade’s model speech in *Fifth Chinese Daughter*), because these overlapping oppressions render articulation the way out.

To speak up, to articulate thus becomes a female poetics against racist and patriarchal silencing. Nonetheless, I argue this is not a *sine qua non*, because silence meanders between being powerful and powerless, oppressive and liberatory. More specifically, while articulation can indeed be a female poetics, I agree with Cheung’s important observation that “silence can also be articulation” (*Articulate Silences* 21). Within and beyond the three texts discussed here, silence moves from an enforced “survival mentality” (Xu 5) to a strategy of response. It is not my intention, however, to elevate silence to the status that Cheryl Glenn contends—“[s]ilence... is the only phenomenon that is always at our disposal” (5); rather, I understand silence as “an oscillation or tension” between the discourses of ethnicity and gender (Dauenhauer 82).

There has been a plethora of readings of *Joy Luck Club* through feminist approaches, most of which focus on the feminist advances the novel achieves within the Asian American literary realm. The novel not only avoids “simply rid[ing] on the coattails of white feminism” but also “tap[s] directly into ‘universal’ concerns from the vantage point of individual insight” (S. Wong, “Sugar Sisterhood” 179). Melanie McAlister praises Tan for breaking “the silence of Asian and Asian American

women” and enabling her female characters to claim selfhood: “stories are told, subjectivity is constructed” (10). The novel goes further, affirming, empowering, and revising the terms of representation (Heung 607). Likewise, Marie Foster reads the characters’ storytelling as a quest for voice, in which mind and self are intricately intertwined (95–96). Beyond textual content, critics also underscore narrative forms—oral storytelling and intratextual writing—as confirming the female characters’ authorship and thus their subjectivity (Dunick 6). The female characters’ silence has likewise prompted positive readings: Ben Xu, for example, regards Lindo’s deliberate silence as a survival strategy in an estranged land. Amy Ling, comparing Tan and Kingston, contends that *Joy Luck Club* at times answers Kingston’s ambivalence and hostility towards silence, suggesting that silence can sometimes function as concealed power (135). These critiques have significantly illuminated the gender analysis of *Joy Luck Club*; nonetheless, few scholars have closely examined how specific language practices forge gender and silence, or interrogated their linkage at an ideological level.

The scholarship on *Joan Is Okay* and *Chinese Groove* is comparatively limited, but the intersections between language and gender—and silence as a major thematic—remain worthy of exploration. Drawing on Butler’s theory, Chapter Two asks: how do Chinese, English, and silence represent or index gender? In what ways are the relations between language and gender fluidity? And, ultimately, to what extent do these relations reflect the gender ideologies promoted by the social realities in which these three authors write? Although Wenying Xu, in her discussion of Tan’s feminisation of Chinese myths, argues that the Chinese language is (male-)gendered (86), in this dissertation I avoid assigning either language a fixed gender. The valences represented by languages can be gendered; however, I maintain that the

gendering of languages is mutable and mediated. For clarity, I occasionally use ‘masculine language’ to denote circumstances in which language enacts patriarchal authority and thus appears to exert an oppressive force. By the same token, I do not contend that silence is inherently gendered; rather, I analyse the power relations between genders as they are articulated through the authors’ deployments of silence.

This dissertation is composed of two main chapters. Chapter One focuses on how pidgin and code-switching in the three novels constitute Chinese Americanness. In this chapter, I examine the Chinese uses and acknowledge their effects in cultivating the protagonists’ selfhood as well as their ethnic awareness. I give special attention to Tan’s Chinese uses in *Joy Luck Club* and argue against the burden of representation that critics impose on her. Tan’s Chinese uses mirror her personal life as an American daughter of a Chinese mother, and her occasional unconventional usages do not hinder her from producing a successful and affecting personal project. Chapter Two addresses the interrelations between language and gender identity. I examine the fluid distribution of gendered power relations in the three novels and, more vitally, what that distribution further implies about gendered power relations within their speech communities and within their state ideological carriers—the two nations. My conclusion extends this idea: with a closer focus on the three writers’ authorial realities, I discuss how their different experiences as Chinese Americans guide them to use Chinese and to manifest their distinct zeitgeists. By attending to authorial reality, I aim to sketch the evolution of Chinese Americanness in literature and in the real-world U.S.

Chapter One

Anglophone Writing Playing with Chinese: Language Uses, Cultural Identity, and Individual Expression

In this comparative reading of Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), Weike Wang's *Joan Is Okay* (2022), and Kathryn Ma's *The Chinese Groove* (2023), I thread my interpretations of Chinese uses in these three novels with Rey Chow's ethnically contextualised discussion of "going native", "the melancholy turn" (Chow, *Not Like a Native Speaker* 65), and "coerced mimeticism" (Chow, "Introduction: On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem" 19). Through this lens, I first examine how uses of Chinese signpost immigrant experiences in the three novels, and argue such signposting concretises going native and can perform the therapeutic melancholy turn. The connotations of 'native' here unfold multidimensionally—linguistically, geographically, and emotionally—but on the whole, the term "going native" signals a directional move of going back. To go native is to accomplish the melancholy turn, the melancholy memorial, which marks "the claim to a certain original condition...with the plaint that this original condition is irrevocably...lost" (Chow, *Not Like a Native Speaker* 65). I then discuss the scalability of 'mimeticism' in terms of Chinese uses in the three novels. Specifically, I interpret Chinese use in *Joy Luck Club* as more mimetic of Tan's authorial reality than the cultural reality and point out the critics' solicitation of coerced mimeticism in *Joy Luck Club*. In the same vein, I then discuss Wang's and Ma's authorial styles. In light of Chow's theorisations, I aim to examine the evolution of Chinese Americanness in the three novels through the authors' Chinese uses, both within and beyond their texts.

Joy Luck Club centres around the narratives of four Chinese immigrant women who co-found a mahjong group, the Joy Luck Club, and their American-born daughters. The clashes in the mother-daughter relationships are the core, epitomising the generational cultural conflicts. *Joy Luck Club*'s popular reception owes much to its exotic elements of Chinese pidgin English and Chinese. The prologue, presented as a Chinese immigrant woman's monologue, already foregrounds language as a central concern: "*Over there nobody will look down on her [her daughter], because I will make her speak only perfect American English... Now the woman was old. And she had a daughter who grew up speaking only English*" (Tan, *Joy Luck Club* 4; italics in original), the woman, however, never manages to speak the "*perfect American English*" (4). This linguistic situation characterises the whole novel: the Chinese mothers speak pidgin and code-switch between English (or a pidgin form thereof) and Chinese while the daughters speak Standard American English. By examining the novel's in-text pidgin and code-switching, I focus less on how Tan's uses of Chinese contribute to or hinder the serious theme of identity formation, but rather turn my attention to Tan's strategic employment of pidgin and Chinese. Tan's techniques do not achieve linguistic 'realism' but rather present her personal life wherein pidgin and Chinese enfold her emotions. My reading thus questions image of Tan as cultural spokeswoman established by previous critics, addresses the burden to perform a representative of Chinese American community, and accentuates her personal sentiment as an immigrant mother's daughter.

Pidgin in *Joy Luck Club*

Since Chinese Pidgin English (CPE) is a widely used term, it is necessary to first grasp its conceptual nature and structure, from which Tan's usage diverges. Arising

in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century China, CPE emerged as an English variant used especially for trading. Studies of CPE date back to Charles Leland's 1786 collection of pidgin vocabulary and stories, *Pidgin-English Sing-Song*, and the field is still being explored by linguists. Among important studies of CPE, Robert Hall's 1944 article provides a thorough outline of CPE's grammatical structure, including sample texts in phonetic transcription. Philip Baker's later 1987 study identifies 34 such features in terms of phonetics and grammar (175). However, Tan's use of pidgin, which finds its origin in her mother's real-life utterances, does not conform to any of these established rules—because Tan repurposes her pidgin uses in accordance with her mother Daisy's daily speech, and Tan sees this as an approach to present Daisy's emotions more vividly, thus to deeply understand Daisy's life.

I here take Lindo Jong's extensive use of pidgin as a textual example. Lindo's pidgin first appears in her daughter Waverly Jong's childhood memories, as Waverly recalls how Lindo taught her "the art of invisible strength": "At home, she said, 'Wise guy, he not go against wind. In Chinese we say, Come from South, blow with wind—poom!—North will follow. Strongest wind cannot be seen'" (Tan, *Joy Luck Club* 61). Lindo's English is grammatically crooked: simple in structure, erroneous in grammar, she can hardly form a complete sentence but only a series of key words. She omits auxiliaries and articles, violates subject-verb agreement, and disrupts typical syntax. Most importantly, her use of pidgin is circumlocutory rather than concrete: instead of illustrating the power of silence and strong inner fortitude through the language itself, Lindo's English relies on ambiguous pronouns ("he not go against wind"), metaphors ("wind"), and onomatopoeia ("poom!") to convey her ideas.

This pattern recurs when Lindo later attempts to explain the rules of chess to her

children. Unable to understand the instructions due to her illiteracy in English, she quickly concludes with her dismissal of “the American rules”:

“This American rules,” she concluded at last. “Every time people come out from foreign country, must know rules. You not know, judge say, Too bad, go back. They not telling you why so you can use their way go forward. They say, Don’t know why, you find out yourself. But they knowing all the time. Better you take it, find out why yourself.” (65)

Here, Lindo departs from explaining the chess rules to her children and instead extends the notion of rules from chess to the wider U.S. national context, which reminds her of the mistreatment she suffered as an immigrant, and the chess rules are instead translated by Lindo into her personal experience. Her English here functions as both a grammatical and semantic pidgin, semantic because her narrative appears incongruous in this context: divergent from chess and not clarifying the rules, her words are not a ‘native’ answer to her children’s puzzle regarding the game. Lindo’s narrative shows her way of seeing “‘symbols’ rather than words”, which lacks “any inherent connection between signifier and signified” (Finkle, “American Rules and Chinese Faces” 81). Her illiteracy which blinds her from seeing the signifier-signified connection, however, allows her to see that the essence of institutionalised immigration is nothing more than a game.

Folded into Lindo’s pidgin are her teachings for her children that they should be cagey, keep their answers and solutions to themselves and never reveal them to others. Despite her mother’s apparently discursive language, Waverly is nevertheless able to fully grasp her mother’s teaching on inner power: “I also found out why I should never reveal ‘why’ to others. A little knowledge withheld is a great advantage one should store for future use... one must show and never tell” (Tan, *Joy Luck Club* 66). Lindo expresses her ideas through a language that seems off the topic but somehow effectively speaks to Waverly and helps her navigate the world. Lindo’s

pidgin, in this sense, is both Waverly's mother's tongue and her mother tongue, bonding the mother and the daughter.

This implicit communication between mother and daughter is to a large extent Tan's rewriting of the conversation between her own mother and herself. In her essay "Mother Tongue" (1990), Tan describes her mother's English as "limited" in terms of both grammar and semantics, noting that Daisy's "expressive command of English belies how much she actually understands" (7). Because her mother's spoken English is limited, certain information remains obscured or omitted, which makes her speech seem abrupt. A vivid example, also the one most corresponding to Lindo's reading of chess rules, is recorded by Tan when she tries to explain the Amendments to the Constitution to her mother:

Let me see book. Amendments to Constitution. First Amendment, this not law, not like Ten Commandments. This like saying you own something, now many laws protect. I know this, because Daddy and I memorize this for citizenship test. Got 100 percent. What you think, I so ignorant, know nothing? I know. This important amendment, American right. But this don't mean you say what you want to me. That's not American right, this treat your mother bad. (Tan, *Where the Past Begins* 306)

Daisy's knowledge of the Constitutional Amendments surprises Tan, because she did not suppose her illiterate immigrant mother to have exposure to such knowledge. Meanwhile, Daisy is well aware of Tan's unspoken doubts: rather than continuing their discussion of the Amendments, she shifts to criticise Tan's 'disrespectfulness'. Daisy's English and Lindo's English are therefore both in a 'crooked grammar' and both drift from the original topic to the narratives of their own diasporic experience. Their English is a language through which they inscribe themselves in "an alien culture, a way of preserving significance in the new reality of America" (Heung 604), an alien reality where to relate American rules to themselves signifies their survival, and the relation is accomplished not through understanding the accurate,

literal contents of rules but through experiencing the rules as diasporic subjects.

Tan translates her conversations with her mother into those between Waverly and Lindo. This peculiar intralingual translation strikes a chord with Chow's illustration of translation as a process of cultural transmission. In her reading of early-twentieth-century Chinese literature that deals with scenes of retrospection, Chow layers the term "translation" with a new intralingual interpretation: "this epochal reflexive rendering of an indigenous tradition by way of depressive scenarios (and depressive characters) may also be compared to an act of translation" (Chow, *Not Like a Native Speaker* 65). "Translation", by presenting and being presented by the "depressive scenarios" where old people or rituals die, is now reintroduced as a process of cultural transmission and transformation (65). This process seeks to include "illegible and often unconscious elements of languaging ...[and] what is partially remembered, what is erroneous but frequently reiterated, and, ultimately, what remains unsaid and unsayable" (65). And since this translation specifically deals with mourning rituals, Chow characterises the procedure as melancholy, in the same vein as Sigmund Freud's melancholia, a pathological, unending grieving process that diminishes self-regard.

Freud distinguishes melancholia from mourning, a putatively normal phase that can be "overcome after a certain lapse of time" (Freud 244). Chow on the other hand views the melancholy process as enabling and teases out the "tremendous *generative* potential" within (Chow, *Native Speaker* 71; original emphasis). She argues that the original conditions of injury and loss are intertwined with cultural productivity and designates this dynamic as "the melancholy turn." This turn is pursued "in the form of a moral quest for justice on behalf of the vanished original", that even if what is lost is irretrievable, "we can at least be melancholic" (71). Chow posits that such a

melancholy turn, conducted by going native, functions as a therapeutic endeavour: it aims to restore to the demeaned native experience its “due attention and validity” (71). I see Tan’s pidgin uses as such a translation because Tan is languaging Daisy’s pidgin into her text. Although this process does not involve and death or mourning, it exemplifies Tan’s “going native” in the magnitude of her real life. Reminiscing on her childhood conversations with her mother, Tan says she “grew up with a sense of danger” and loneliness because she “didn’t understand” and “didn’t realise where these [words] come from. They came from her life. I didn’t know her life” (“NEA Big Read: Meet Amy Tan”). By writing her mother into her text, Tan puts herself “into that time...and her [Daisy]’s circumstances” and tries to tease out what Daisy’s words could have meant (“NEA Big Read”). This process signals an imaginary journey of going native, through which Tan becomes to understand her mother and ‘the China’ her mother lived in.

Code-Switching in *Joy Luck Club*

Code-switching in *Joy Luck Club* is Tan’s other linguistic approach to understand and reminisce about Daisy, although Tan’s use has invited critique and, perhaps, incurs the strongest charges of Orientalism against her. Such vilifications, as I read them, follow an essentialist logic that an ethnic writer should only write about the cultural essence, and the cultural essence should entail cultural authenticity. Indeed, Tan’s uses of Chinese in *Joy Luck Club* are problematic, but my discussion here questions the rationale that good ethnic writing presupposes linguistic accuracy and argues that her personal authorial truth is an alternative form of authenticity. Tan learns the Chinese expressions from her mother Daisy; the expressions she deploys in the text are thus where fictional voices and Daisy’s real-world voice converge. *Joy Luck Club* therefore is at least an authentic bildungsroman in terms of Tan’s

emotions about her mother.

In *Joy Luck Club*, code-switching takes the form of the Romanised Chinese spellings, accompanied by its English translation. Tan's code-switching hinges on cultural terms and mostly replaces English expressions when referring to identity and culture. For instance, An-Mei's mother murmurs to her dying grandmother, "*Nuyer* is here. Your daughter is back", and June says to her sisters in China, "*Jyejye*, *Jyejye*. Sister, Sister. We are here" (Tan, *Joy Luck Club* 27, 230). The Romanised words at other times represent quintessential cultural concepts. In such circumstances, the Romanised words often encapsulate the gist of an anecdote. For example, Rose witnesses how *nengkan*—diligence, the Chinese faith in the "ability to do anything [one] put[s] his mind to"—fails her parents, and Ying Ying's reflections on how *chi*, "the spirit" in Chinese expression, should guide her and her daughter's life (91, 117). However, some of Tan's Chinese uses are indeed problematic; the misuses range from incorrect pinyin spelling ("*Chiszle*," "mad to death," is supposed to be '*qi si le*'; "*gwa*," the melon, should be '*gua*' [Tan, *Joy Luck Club* 17, 206]), to wrong Chinese word choices (The misused word "*shou*" (寿) for filial piety, meaning "respect for ancestors or family," should be '*xiao*,' (孝), a completely different Chinese character [23]). Also, An-Mei's reminder to Rose—" "*Dangsyng tamende shenti*,' which means 'Take care of them,' or literally, 'Watch out for their bodies'" —and her response " "*Yiding*.' I must." both fall outside idiomatic Chinese uses (93). Moreover, there are misspelled pinyin words whose correct forms cannot even be recognised ("*chuming*," "*yidafadwo*"). It is reasonable, then, that Tan's mishandlings of Chinese spur scepticism for some Sinophone critics about her proposed insider identity, for she is seen as using Chinese merely as a

“rendering of the bizarre Chinese behaviour,” which non-Chinese readers may read as plausible and praiseworthy details but which grates on Chinese ears (S. Ma, “Orientalism” 112).

However, Tan’s position as a cultural insider is essentially just one possible critical presumption among the work’s varied reception. Is such a postulation not, to use Ian Ang’s words, “pinning down people to their ethnic identity, by marking them as ethnic” (Ang 77), which reinforces cultural writing as “a way of locking individuals and groups a priori into a genealogy, into a determination that is immutable and intangible” (Balibar 134)? Also, such a cultural reading is unlikely Tan’s true intent: in one interview, Tan observes that “[w]hat people read the book for seems to be so much about role models, cultural explanation, historical point of view” (qtd. in Adams 99), whereas what she has claimed to want to write is simply stories for a specific reader—her mother—because these stories mirror her mother’s past (Tan, “Mother Tongue” 8). The language used to write the past has a tone that “bypass[es] the part of the brain where syntax, semantics, and phonological rules operate” but carries communication “through only intonation and tone of voice, the expressions of love, assurance, and happiness” (Tan, *Where the Past Begins* 290). The tone of voice crystallise the emotional nuances enfolded within language, the “intent, and subtext of words said in anger, with worry, or with tenderness”, which Tan claims to have an “intuition” to understand and to be truly fluent at (294).

In line with this, some codeswitching expressions of the four mother figures in *Joy Luck Club*, drawn from Daisy’s daily utterances, are loaded with emotions: ‘... sǐ le,’ literally ‘to death,’ indicating an extreme case, recurs in *Joy Luck Club*. For instance, Lindo complains about a staff member who refuses to let her return a skirt, “‘I was *chiszle*,’ she says, still fuming,” and about the stinky restroom at a restaurant:

“‘*Choszle!*’—Stinks to death in there!” (Tan, *Joy Luck Club* 17, 135). These insertions of Chinese, idiosyncratically Romanised, do not necessarily convey deeper cultural connotations; they are casually taken from a first-generation Chinese immigrant’s everyday conversations, epitomising a short-tempered, sharp-tongued but loving mother whose ‘sour’ words emotionally bind her to her daughter. And it is through these emotions that Tan understands and remembers her own mother. Tan’s code-switching here aims to “effectively write the [Western] readers into the text as a crucial participant in the making of meaning” more of Daisy than of China or Chineseness (Heung 613). She shares with her readers this message: this novel is a tribute to my mother.

In her reading of *Joy Luck Club*, Bella Adams defends Tan’s Chinese usage as “[t]he movement of language to and fro” which “problematizes the possibility of ‘the real’ and, indeed, ‘the fake’” (102). Tan’s language rendition questions the author’s ethnicity as the criterion for distinguishing what is culturally ‘real’ or ‘fake’. Her problematisation of language resonates with Chow’s term coerced mimeticism, which is “a kind of collective linguistic/stylistic mandate under which writing has to be reflectionist, has to be an authentic copy of the nation’s reality” (“Introduction” 19). Here, mimeticism is no longer a mere literary convention, but “a type of representational copulation forced at the juncture between literature and ethnicity,” one that forces writing related to China and Chinese to “correspond faithfully to life of the Chinese nation as an ethnic unit” (19). Chin’s, Wong’s, and similarly minded critics’ critiques, I argue, follow the logic of such faux mimeticism and risk reproducing a Western “stereotyped way to control and police” (20) Chinese literary writing, while at the same time, quite ironically, accusing Tan of being a western Orientalist. The ‘problematic’ pidgin and code-switching in *Joy Luck Club*, within

this framework, challenge coerced mimeticism.

Code-switching in *Joan Is Okay*

Such linguistic strategies are likewise practiced in contemporary Chinese American writings. Set in New York between 2019 and the 2020 pandemic period, Weike Wang's *Joan Is Okay* serves as an example. Born in Oakland and raised in several U.S. cities, the protagonist Joan, a child of Chinese immigrant parents, is a successfully assimilated U.S. citizen who has a well-paid job as an ICU doctor in a New York hospital. Joan is reserved, emotionally detached, and more comfortable with her work than with social interaction. Her brother Fang has established himself as a successful financier in the U.S. Their parents, feeling 'mission completed' that their two children have settled down in the U.S., move back to China. The novel starts with Joan's mother phoning Joan to tell her that Joan's father has died. The event tosses a stone into Joan's life and triggers a series of other events: Joan's memories of her childhood and tribute to her father, Joan's widowed mother moving back to the U.S. to reconnect with her children, and Joan is requested by the HR to take her bereavement leave during which time the COVID pandemic breaks out. All of these events push Joan to reflect on her identity as a Chinese American woman. Having grown up in the U.S., Joan speaks standard American English so perfectly that her colleagues do not even know she also speaks Chinese. Her director, even though knows that Joan is ethnically Chinese, does not expect her to maintain any connection to China. That Joan's father passed away in China is, for him, an "extraordinary" incident (Wang 36). Despite being considered distant from China, Joan still occasionally brings in Chinese in her interior monologues.

Joan code-switches between English and Chinese: she presents Chinese in

pinyin—the official system of Romanising Chinese based on European languages—and translates them into English. The translations are delivered in Wang’s authorial voice to the readers, most of whom are assumed to be Anglophone; she provides first the full meaning of the Chinese, then a verbatim translation of each Chinese component word of the phrase. For example, when Joan and a Korean student are talking about snacks, Joan “told her that Chinese word [for snack] is *líng shí*, or ‘zero foods’” (153). Among the three novels discussed here, Wang’s Chinese romanisation adheres most strictly to standard pinyin rules, which saliently reflects Joan’s rigorousness. Throughout the novel, one particular Chinese character, *chuang*, stands out and threads the plots together. The character epitomises Joan’s grief for her father as well as her familial diasporic experience. Wang here plays a little with different tone emphasis of the character—Joan had always thought her father said *chuàng*, but later realises he could mean *chuǎng*. The two characters braid the novel’s narratives: similar in pronunciation but different in meaning, both characters embody Joan’s father’s willpower as an immigrant who paves his family’s way in the U.S. Here, I examine Joan’s realisation in the course of the narrative of the *chuang* her father really meant, and argue this process navigates Joan out of her grieving and guides her to eventually understand her father as well as herself. Her self-understanding further registers as an individual reification of contemporary Chinese Americanness.

Some of Wang’s Chinese uses convey strong quintessentially Chinese cultural ideas, consistent with earlier Chinese American writing. For example, Wang mentions the Chinese phrase *chī kǔ*, a Chinese form of endurance and stoicism³. The

³ Chinese historically and culturally favour endurance and stoicism. The concept has been promoted by generations of sages. Mencius has famously said, “Hence, when Heaven is about to bestow a great responsibility on a particular person, it will always first subject one’s heart and resolution to bitterness, belabor one’s muscles

idea recurs across generations of Chinese American immigrant literature: for example, Tan's use of the pinyin phrase *nengkan*, meaning being diligent and handy; Jade Snow Wong's account of how she overcame multiple hardships in order to achieve success in her autobiography *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945); and Louis Chu's depiction of Chinese immigrants' emotional and physical survival in his novel *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1961). In *Joan Is Okay*, this phrase is re-evoked: "And, most important, to eat hardship, suffering, and pain, *chī kǔ*, a *defining* Chinese quality, to be able to bear a great deal without showing a crack" (165, my emphasis). At other times, Joan's Chinese appear more casual: "To chat is to *liáo tiān*, or literally 'to gab about the sky' ... it was not like her [Joan's mother] to find me just to chat" (43). I focus exactly on Joan's as well as Wang's familiarity and flexibility in navigating between the two languages and argue that such linguistic flexibility signifies the fluidity in their Chinese-Americanness. I further argue Wang purports such identificatory spontaneousness to be the contemporary Chinese-Americanness.

The character *chuang* first appears when Joan is informed that her father is in a coma due to a severe stroke. In her mother's call, she utters the character to her father. The Chinese word has "many different definitions, one of which was 'to begin,'" "to innovate, to achieve, to strive" (5, 95). Joan closely associates the character and the spirit it embodies with her late father, who came to the U.S. from Shanghai in the 1980s, poor, without social status or citizenship, but worked tirelessly to ensure his children were "never hungry, never without clothes or proper shelter," and got a good education (78). Once Joan and her brother Fang were

and bones, starve one's body and flesh, deprive one's person, and thwart and bring chaos to what one does. By means of these things it perturbs one's heart, toughens one's nature, and provides those things of which one is incapable." See *The Essential Mengzi: Selected Passages with Traditional Commentary*, translated and edited by Bryan W. Van Norden. Hackett Publishing Company, 2009, pp. 157.

accepted into college—noticeably, though perhaps unsurprisingly, as a ‘model minority’ parent whose dream has been to send his children to Ivy League universities—the immigrant father regarded his parental mission as fulfilled: this was what he had *chuàng*. *Chuàng* entails an archetypal successful immigrant story. Joan has seen how her father built their life in the U.S., and the character therefore has now become a conduit for Joan’s memories and current grief. However, Wang’s use of the character is not entirely unproblematic. In the conventions of Chinese language use, *chuàng* seldom functions as a standalone word; it is primarily a component of compound words,⁴ the concept akin to transitivity in English grammar. Although the meaning of *chuàng* as ‘to create’ is well established, the habitual way, in ordinary Chinese, is to use the character in phrases, oftentimes in *chuàng zào* (创造), where the latter character also means ‘to make’, ‘to invent’. This misuse by Wang can be easily regarded as one of Sau-ling Wong’s ironic “markers of authenticity” which signpost the author’s familiarity with the cultural discourse while signifying the nebulous category of the “authentic” in lieu of the informational details that truly matter (“Sugar Sisterhood” 187). Nonetheless, Wang possibly uses *chuàng* as a camouflage to deliberately foreshadow her correct use of another Chinese character: *chuǎng* (闯): Near the end of the novel, Joan realises that her father “could have meant another *chuàng* ... The other *chuǎng* is third tone, not fourth”, referring to “breaking down barriers and charging through” (Wang 197).

This moment of revelation occurs to Joan after her several repetitions of earlier ‘misuses’, which she sees as a way to commemorate her father and his instructions. Such repetitions participate in Joan’s “translation” of her father: by repeating her

⁴ According to *The Contemporary Chinese Dictionary* (Beijing: FLTRP, 2002), *chuàng* (创)’s equivalence in English is intransitive; it is defined as “begin (*to do sth.*)” (306, my emphasis).

father's words, she is "going native" to her memory of her father, trying to think and act like her father, exactly as Tan has done when she writes about her mother Daisy. At one moment, Joan notices her physical resemblance to her father, specifically their hands: "I looked down at my hand and noticed that they are the same shape as my father's. The same square fingers and fingernails, the same knuckle protrusions and creases around the joints" (178). The similar hands symbolise how Joan's father lives on her and how Joan continues to strive, as their hands metaphorically represent what Joan's father and Joan have *chuǎng* or started, and the labour and hardship undertaken by them. Joan's resemblance to her father extends beyond their similar hands to their efforts in building up their life in the U.S., their respective versions of the American Dream. Joan's realisation of the right *chuang* marks the moment she works through her grief and moves on; the moment hence is where her melancholy turn registers. Joan's loss of her father, entangled with her self-reflections on identity, evolves into melancholia. Such melancholia is especially potent for her as a minority in America "because America is founded on the very ideals of freedom and liberty whose betrayals have been repeatedly covered over" (Cheng 10).

I analyse Joan's engagement in melancholia and going native in a twofold manner: going native firstly designates Joan's geographical returning to her birthplace and secondly her mentally going through her memories of her father and her childhood. The novel begins with Joan's travel back to China for her father's funeral, which *per se* is a melancholy obligation. Since Joan has based her life trajectory in the U.S. and is unaccustomed to China, her stay in the country intrinsically demands her efforts to translate the country, principally for herself. People and circumstances in China, nonetheless, only stir a feeling of estrangement

in Joan: “Hasn’t China changed? my cousin asked ... I said I didn’t know the country too well” (Wang 11). Even her deceased father becomes someone unfamiliar: “At the funeral, I couldn’t talk about my father in a significant way”, and she goes so far as to say, “I told my cousin that I was sorry for *her* loss. My father was a good uncle and a good comrade overall” (12, my emphasis). The target product of the translation thus aligns in many ways with what Ruth Maxey in her discussions of ethnic return terms the “deferred home”, whose nature remains inherently inaccessible (82). One critical moment is when Joan lands at the airport in Shanghai, she feels lost. The sense of loss addressed here echoes Joan’s loss of her father, and moreover underscores the melancholia of her (re)turn. The start of Joan’s act of translation, which is enacted by her returning to her origin, has not proven effectively therapeutic, as her origin remains elusive and nebulous to her.

Joan’s going native also unfolds as an emotional return sparked by Chinese. The mother tongue triggers her childhood memories, dovetailing her past and her current life. Joan translates the emotions that have been left unsaid between her father and her into *chuang*, the translation process enabling Joan to transform her melancholia into mourning. As aforementioned, *chuang* is introduced when Joan speaks to her already unconscious father over the phone. When her colleagues hear her talk and ask Joan, “what was that strange sound [she] just made”, she replies, “the sound was closer to a word but the word meant *nothing*” (5, my emphasis). Such a claim is momentarily true, because Joan’s father’s sudden accident leaves her in a mental state of shock, loss and confusion, and at this beginning stage of her melancholia, her father’s death to her is merely information; what it stands for and how it will influence Joan’s life, she has yet to find out. It is not that she does not know the literal meaning of *chuàng*, but rather that she has not understood the character as an

emblem of her father. Later, when tunnelling through her childhood memories, Joan recalls being poor but never “hungry, never without clothes or proper shelter”— thanks to her hard-working and frugal immigrant parents, their life somehow remains as “[a] good memory. A fond one” to Joan (78). Here, Joan goes native to her childhood memories: she translates her current American life as the culmination of her Chinese immigrant parents’ hard work plus her own strivings as part of a racial minority. Their ethos to create and their faith in their hands to build up a successful life remain solidly unchanging. Later, Joan returns to the character *chuàng* and examines it anatomically:

To write a Chinese word, we sometimes do it in halves. On the left-hand side, we can put a person (人) on top of an ocean wave (浪) and, on the right-hand side, give this wave-riding person a knife (刀). A knife for fighting with, for striving with; a knife to accompany you on the unknown sea adventure ahead.

Chuàng (創): to create something that never was, to forge a new path, to innovate, to achieve, to strive; anything worth doing requires a person to *chuàng*. (95)

Joan’s dissection of the character shows how she understands and absorbs the spirit embodied within it. The anatomy of the word represents Joan’s father as well as her American life: the two pioneer figures cleave the unknown sea ahead and forge their path through the new, strange nation. Joan dissects the character in her interior monologue, but the tone comes more from Wang, addressing her Anglophone readers who are outsiders to Chinese, instructing the knowledge of Chinese, and introducing this general rite of passage encountered by Chinese immigrants.

Towards the end of the novel, Joan has moved beyond her melancholia: the memories of her father begin to fade, and she is already “forgetting things about my father. I was forgetting how low his voice could be, how he would mumble and flatten his tones” (197). Exactly as she is passing through the grieving phase, the

correct *chuang* dawns on her:

In truth he could have meant another *chuàng*, besides the one about going off to sea. I should have asked him which he intended, but I never got around to that.

The other *chuǎng* is third tone, not fourth. For this *chuǎng*, we put a horse (马) inside a door (门), such that the character itself, 闯, refers to breaking down barriers and charging through. (197)

The character *chuǎng*, meaning to “charge; bolt” and “pioneer” (*The Contemporary Chinese Dictionary* 304), is commonly used on its own, and its meaning fits in the contexts where *chuàng* has been situated earlier. The change, or ‘correction’ of the character, marks the end of Joan’s melancholia. Now pondering over the right *chuǎng*, she is “reminded of the Trojan horse, the surprise gift horse outside, but also of horsepower, which now belonged to cars. A green Mustang might be irrefutable American muscle, but so was the driver [her father] inside” (197). Here, Joan is referring to the time when her father surprised the family by renting a lime-green Mustang and taking them for a ride. To her father, nothing is more American than this car, inside which “even the weak could feel strong”, the Chinese feeling American (79). Wang has in some sense reserved this character for the moment of revelation. Through the correction—even if it is just a slight adjustment to the tone—Joan expresses her renewed gratitude to her father and his hard work, and finally accepts the fact of his death. Ending her mourning, Joan properly says farewell to her father through an imagined conversation: “He was pure American muscle with a Chinese heart. Goodbye, doctor-daughter, goodbye, but also see you again” (197).

Code-switching in *The Chinese Groove*

If *Joy Luck Club* emblematises China in its past, while *Joan Is Okay* portrays a

contemporary Chinese American figure, *Chinese Groove*, in its content, sits between these two novels, telling an apparently typical story of a Chinese trying to achieve his American dream in the 2015 U.S., scaffolded by his faith in what he calls the Chinese groove. This key phrase refers to the natural, deep rapport between Chinese fellow countrymen and threads together the novel's plots. Shelley Zheng (Zheng Xue Li), the protagonist of *Chinese Groove*, is an eighteen-year-old student, "the bastard son" born into "the despised branch of the family" in Gejiu, Yunnan Province, China (Ma 1). "The relatives treated me rudely, beating me and calling me names", begins Shelley's narration (1). Shelley's mother dies in his teenage years, leaving his father in a perpetual state of melancholy. Feeling forsaken and burdened at home, Shelley heads to the U.S. with an optimistic aspiration to become a rich poet there. His confidence that the familial bond between the Zhengs will help him prosper in the U.S. is shattered when he finds out that his 'successful' uncle Ted, who lives in San Francisco, does not run a business as his father has told Shelley, but, worse, has been laid off and now works as a freelance writer for different outlets. Unable and unwilling to fund Shelley, Ted and his Jewish American wife Aviva offer him a two-week stay in their house, other than which they decline to offer anything more. The Chinese groove, which Shelley firmly believed would work, only eludes him. Without the financial and emotional aid from the Chinese groove, the U.S., where Shelley anchored his dream now leaves him stranded, homeless, and penniless. Shelley, however, is not deflated; he keeps trying to situate himself and his dream in this brutal new reality. The novel, however, ends with Shelley leaving the U.S. and returning to Yunnan, China, suggesting a joyful reconciliation between Shelley and his home country.

Shelley leaves China because his relatives alienate and abuse him for being the

‘bastard’ son. He thus relocates his expected sense of belonging to the U.S. Central to the novel is thus Shelley’s quest for belonging and inclusion, and he sees his excellent academic performance in English as the capital for his quest, the safe net for his future prosperity (36). Ma interweaves Shelley’s narratives with a pinyin phrase *lao jia*, “the old family home” (4), a Chinese colloquial phrase for one’s hometown, especially where one’s ancestors are from. Here, it specifically refers to Shelley’s hometown in China. Worth noticing is that Shelley uses *lao jia* to allude to both his unpleasant memories and ideal imagination of home. Why does Shelley, and by extension Ma, code-switch the word that bears ideas of home? Why, when Shelley valorises English, does a Chinese expression instead evoke home and belonging? I now address these questions by looking into the entanglement of home and language, particularly the code-switched use of *lao jia*, in *Chinese Groove*.

I start my discussion by taking cues from Avtar Brah’s question: “When does a location *become* home?” (Brah 190, original emphasis). Why would Shelley initially see the U.S. as more of a home, more of the *lao jia*, than China? And how should we read his ultimate returning to China? Shelley heads out to his new ‘home’ in the U.S. with his prior aim to make a fortune; he dreams of becoming a poet who, according to his cousin Deng’s implausible information, “made a ton of dough, ... got fancy cars and special housing, revered as they were by their fellow citizens as keepers of the famous American freedoms” (Ma 2). Since it is almost common knowledge that being a poet is not normally a financially rewarding career, Shelley’s misconception of poet and fortune is therefore possibly Ma’s deliberate strategy to establish a sense of absurdity, by setting up Shelley as a comic character and his journey as a farce. Shelley pictures his future American home in material terms, a fundamental condition to the nature of home, because “[an immigrant’s] [l]ife in...the U.S.

becomes a series of such material negotiations” (Maxey 31). This is especially true in Shelley’s case: the first day Shelley arrives at Ted’s home, he asks about Ted’s store, ready to establish himself and his fortune, because his father has promised him that he will be financially secure by someday running his uncle’s “big department store on the best corner in San Francisco” (16). After Ted tells Shelley that the department store business is only a rumour and that he is just a ghostwriter with a meagre salary, and after Ted and his wife Aviva send Shelley out of their home since they also live on a budget, Shelley’s goal is to find his home in terms of housing.

Shelley’s housing predicaments recall the hardships immigrants had to endure, the “hand-to-mouth, xenophobic, boarding-house world” (43), as depicted in Lin Yutang’s novel *Chinatown Family* (1949) (The protagonist Tom’s home in 1920s New York City is a “room and a half in the basement of the house,” around which “lived Czechs, Greeks, Italians, Jews, Germans, Austrians” [10–11]). Similar experiences also appear in *Joy Luck Club* and *Joan Is Okay*: as Lena describes their home, “inside it was old. The front door with its narrow glass panes opened into a musty lobby that smelled of everybody’s life mixed together” (Tan, *Joy Luck Club* 77), and Joan remembers her family squeezing into a typically limited space: “the four of us sneaking into a Super 8 motel for which [her father] had paid the price of only one guest” (Wang 78). At this stage, home for Shelley is a place where he can sleep; thereby, the notion of home is inextricably linked to down-to-earth material and financial realities. Shelley, however, has the constant confidence to change the course of events and sticks to his belief that his command of English promises financial prosperity here: once the “poet money roll[s] in”, he will have established himself (Ma 20). Shelley’s faith that he will profit from a perfect command of English, as I will now argue, is a false belief constructed by Ma only to be shattered.

In an interview with Mitzi Rapkin in 2023, Ma describes Shelley as someone who has a high proficiency in English and a love for language. Ma specifies Shelley's love for language in the text by naming him after the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley to reflect his pursuit of a poet's career in the U.S. Shelley's goal to become a poet ultimately serves his dream of fortune and his dream of love, because he will write "three splendid poems" to court Lisbet, an American exchange student he met back in China (Ma 33). His illusions are shattered when the truth is revealed. No money from poetry will roll in—"Ted looked amused. '...Poets are poorer than I am... When poets make money, pigs will fly'" (48)—nor does Lisbet even remember she has three poems to expect: "'You made me promise! Three splendid poems.' 'Oh. I'm sorry. I don't remember.' ... Lisbet looked embarrassed" (119).

Besides the fact that Shelley's English skills eventually fail to achieve his dream of fortune and love, his engagement with English at the outset suggest an anachronism and misplacement: the name Shelley, celebrating the literary tradition of English poetry—or, to push the intertextual entanglement further, possibly echoing Kingston's protagonist Wittman Ah Sing in *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989), who is named after Walt Whitman and is most likely based on Frank Chin in real life (Kim 210)—Percy Bysshe Shelley was an English Romantic poet, not an American. Back in China, Shelley learns his English from Miss Chipping-Highworth, who originally comes from Sussex, England, rather than the U.S. When Shelley first speaks English in the actual American environment, Aviva "can barely understand what he's saying" because his "British accent is plain weird" (24). At the beginning of the novel, Shelley is defined as a non-native speaker of an allochronic and misplaced English, and this non-native position remains fundamental throughout the novel. Significantly, despite all these British influences, Shelley unwaveringly

pins his dream on the U.S. soil. His persistence is possibly driven by his naivety, that he has yet to realise the English varieties and drastically different socio-political and cultural contexts they stand for. His foreign eyes cannot see the allochrony; when he scrutinises the U.S. from a distance, he only sees his ‘successful’ Chinese groove, waving to him from ‘the land of opportunity’.

In addition to his false conceptualisation of anglophone knowledge as fortune, Shelley’s notion of *lao jia* is also shaped by the ethos of “the Chinese groove”, that there is always a familial bond among his fellow “countrymen” who will help each other out in a foreign environment (6). Shelley holds on to this idea and epitomises it through the phrase *lao jia*. This projection is nonetheless ambiguous: while he uses the phrase literally to refer to his family compound in China, he always tries to pin down his Chinese groove in the U.S. I temporarily bring in Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s pair of terms “being home” and “not being home” to argue that the ambiguity originates from the difference “between ‘feeling at home’ and staking claim to a place as one’s own” (Brah 190). Reading Minnie Bruce Pratt’s “Identity: Skin Blood Heart” (1984), Martin and Mohanty distinguish two “modalities” regarding home and belongingness, namely “being home” versus “not being home”: “‘Being home’ refers to the place where one lives within the familiar, safe, protected boundaries; ‘not being home’ is a matter of realizing that home was an illusion of coherence and safety” built by one’s blindness toward the exclusion, oppression and resistance camouflaged by the concept of “home” (196).

Shelley simultaneously experiences “being home” and “not being home” in both the U.S. and China. His narrative of U.S. life is more of a desire—or even fantasy—to *be* home than the actuality that he *is* home: his belief in the Chinese groove, further causing him to (mis)interpret his situations as being cared for by the groove

and feeling at home. When Ted first rejects Shelley's request to live with them, Shelley naively thinks he "had meant exactly the opposite. It was his duty to apologize, as every host does in advance and ever after" (Ma 6). And when Aviva—who, at least according to Shelley, holds a slightly hostile attitude toward him—does not welcome him at the airport, Ted "cleared his throat. 'She's at home. With the others,'" and Shelley thinks, "Ah... Uncle is apologizing for his wife's poor manners. He does live by the Chinese groove" (10).

Shelley's reliance upon the Chinese connections establishes a fictional home that "one can move beyond or recreate at will" (George 200). His feeling of "not being home" is caused by the external "oppression and resistance" he encounters in the U.S., as well as by "the repression of differences even within [him]self" (Martin and Mohanty 196). Shelley continually imposes upon himself the idea that his *lao jia* in China has abandoned him, because he sees his hometown in the eyes of a mistreated 'bastard son': he sees a grieving father and an absent mother, and endless, exhausting chores. His hometown's failure to perform the sense of home exacerbates Shelley's desire to belong. Shelley's longing for a home "that emerges through the actual telling" exists in a "linguistic house" (Buikema 184)—the imagined *lao jia* in the U.S. This *lao jia* therefore produces only narratives and even 'myths' but fails to manifest itself in the real world, only linking to a "mythical geographical homeland" (Nyman 25). Shelley's linguistic construction of home in the U.S. causally connects to his deconstruction of the idea of his Chinese *lao jia*. His very act of leaving his hometown "has deconstructed the home as a home bound to old stories and fixed traditions," marking a sense of loss (Buikema 184). This sense of loss, however, does not get repented by Shelley's quest for home in the U.S., which fails with Shelley realising "the groove wasn't working for either Ted or me. Maybe it didn't

work at all beyond the great border, its powers sapped when a countryman crossed the sea” (197).

The sense of loss stepwise evokes Shelley’s melancholy and mourning, which I explore by returning to Chow’s melancholy turn and going native. For the melancholy turn to weave its generative potential, the turn must “consist rather in a belated and often therapeutic endeavor to go native, to restore to such native experiences (which have been demeaned or immolated) their due attention and validity” (Chow, *Not Like a Native Speaker* 71). The melancholy turn suggests an inward direction and requires the subject of melancholy to face and reinterpret the native experiences. Similar to Joan’s situation discussed earlier, Shelley’s going native unfolds first at a geographical level, which then catalyses his psychological going native. Shelley’s returning to and living in his *lao jia* in China in the epilogue reinstates him in the native experience, enabling him to face his past familial trauma and now translate it into a new perception of his family and country: at the end of the novel, Shelley is teaching history at a university in Mengzi, Yunnan, focusing on historical western interventions in China. Based on his own experience of English acquisition and his journey to the U.S., Shelley justifies the western interventions as both “good and bad”, and he also opines his *lao jia* from this neutral stance: “[m]y country’s past and present also has its good and bad, for better and for worse, which is a barter made by everyone who calls a country ‘home’” (Ma 223). Through going native, Shelley restores the notion of home and the sense of belonging to the Chinese phrase *lao jia*.

The novel offers a reassuring ending for other characters as well: for years, Ted and Aviva have scraped by in a rented “saltbox”-like house in the Outer Sunset District in San Francisco, the “[h]ome ground. District Four, the Sunset, also known

as the Outerlands” (Ma 54). But the delivery app Shelley and Eddie develop yields a huge profit. With money rolling in, Shelley helps Ted and Aviva buy the house. The ending soothingly promises that one will reconcile with one’s ethnicity and the specific ideas it entails (home, country of origin, memories). While Ma closes her writing in this assuring manner, I have doubts: in her acknowledgements in the novel, Ma writes: “The City of San Francisco, my ever-changing home” (226), raising my question of Ma’s position: where is Ma’s *lao jia*?

The Outer Sunset has its historic base: it used to be one of the typical San Francisco neighbourhoods where residents were exclusively white Europeans and Americans due to the racially restrictive covenants on housing deeds. After the restrictions were outlawed by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1948, the Outer Sunset became “the land of opportunity for...immigrant families” (Baszile, “One City One Book”), and minority groups were authorised to own the houses. Living in the Outer Sunset is an excerpt of Ma’s life experience, which is of crisscrossing ties between the U.S. and China. Her great-grandfather moved to the U.S. in the 1860s; her grandmother was born in the U.S., married her Chinese grandfather in New York, moved back to China and bore Ma’s mother in China. Ma’s mother went to the U.S. in the 1940s and married Ma’s father, who is ethnic Chinese, there. Ma was born and brought up in Pennsylvania. Compared with Tan and Wang, Ma has a more remote genealogical relation with China, and almost all her writings on Chinese ethnicity rely on her single visit to China in 1999 (Bell “Kathryn Ma’s ‘The Chinese Groove’ Is a Family Affair”).

It is not surprising that Ma’s knowledge and experience of Chineseness, by comparison with the other two authors, appear limited and peripheral. Her use of Chinese is therefore less versatile: the only Chinese phrase appears in the entire

novel is *lao jia*. To use one meaning-loaded phrase is a safe choice for Ma: the phrase signifies the exotic Chinese element for non-Sinophone Western readers and exempts her from critics' reprimands for using Chinese incorrectly, but it simultaneously exposes her limited knowledge of Chinese. Her rendition of Shelley's poetic ambition analogously reflects her unfamiliarity with China: that Shelley's illusion of a promising, rich poetry career is an outsider's fantasy, a certain kind of cultural ignorance, which obviously violates the common knowledge, ergo, is supposed to be a basis for the humour of the novel. While Tan has incurred censure for using Chinese incorrectly, Ma's not using variant Chinese expressions does not necessarily acknowledge a progression. Her monochromatic use of *lao jia* can designate Shelley's journey as a story about China and Chinese, but far from a Chinese man's story. Wang, though Chinese-born, was similarly brought up and educated in the U.S. Nonetheless, she uses Chinese less as a storytelling skill than as a mirror of a Chinese American's linguistic reality.

Realistic writing has been Wang's writing philosophy, insofar as her portrayal of her protagonists and their settings are highly pertinent to the contemporary U.S. On her decision to return to hospital work during the pandemic, Joan concludes that she goes back simply "because the work needed to get done and I already knew I was a good doctor" (Wang 196). In her work, Joan finds her personal value and she secures her individuality with such value. I interpret Joan's individuality as the reification of her Chinese Americanness, which as a broader term is the heterogeneity of how each individual finds their own sense of belonging. Shaping her protagonists' bilingual linguistic repertoire has been Wang's consistent habit—her protagonists in *Chemistry* (2017) and *Rental House* (2024) and her other short stories are all bilingual. Although Wang's bilingual characters bear similar linguistic characteristics with

Tan's bilingual daughter characters—that they grow up speaking English better than Chinese—Wang's characters differ from Tan's in that they *think* in and out of both English and Chinese. The daughters in *Joy Luck Club* do not speak Chinese so much as simply parrot their mothers' Chinese. For Wang's characters, however, the switch between the two languages is not necessarily an idea of translation or repetition, but a way to construe the protagonists' modes of thinking: “[w]hen I was writing this [*Joan Is Okay*], the idea of translation wasn't necessarily on my mind, but figuring out how she would think as an individual” (Wu “Science, Fiction”). Her bilingual characters' “neuro networks” make them capable of “seeing things differently” (Chai “Weike Wang with Mei-Lee Chai”).

Both English and Chinese are these characters' “arsenal”, and they “would pull random ideas from the arsenal” (Wu “Science, Fiction”). Wang's characters think in a casual mode “to meander and connect things that are not necessarily the most important things in her life”, but the thinking mode is perpetual and formative in the character's life (Wu “Science, Fiction”). Such language uses as actual discourse that is dispersed in bits and pieces align strongly with Chow's term “*linguaging*”, which she defines as “an archiving in process, involving shifting series of transitions among different levels of deposits, remains, excavations, and adaptations” (Chow, *Not Like a Native Speaker* 57). In Wang's novels, English and Chinese language uses are not a zero-sum game: her choice of one does not diminish the other, neither does the use directly translate into the corresponding ethnic identity, inasmuch as identity remains “temporally cumulative yet often vague and seldom [an] entirely verifiable experience left behind by others” (58). It is exactly through random language interchanges—“at once particular and anonymous, at once individual and impersonal, that language mutates and renovates itself” (58)—that Wang connects

Joan's history with her zeitgeist, forming her malleable, mutable Chinese Americanness.

Protagonists with malleable, sometimes even deliberately attenuated Chinese features, are almost Wang's signature. In an interview, she is candid about her reluctance to be pigeonholed as an 'ethnic' writer, and she avoids such categorisation by portraying her protagonists as ordinary, even somewhat banal (Wu "Science, Fiction"). This, however, does not suggest that she has erased her characters' Chineseness which is characterised by their being the model minority: her protagonists, like Joan, are mostly racialised subjects who enjoy high-status professions and comfortable economic conditions⁵. Her parent characters are minority immigrants who clench their jaws to go through hardship and eventually build up their fortune and their future, i.e. their U.S.-born children.

That idea notwithstanding, it is less Wang's intent to centralise this stereotyped characterisation of the Chinese American model minority; she simply sees and handles it as part of a more quotidian reality. As she puts it, "A 'model minority' can be a myth, but it's also a reality. If we never write about that kind of person, so many people disappear... If I don't write about these characters, I'm also erasing them, and I'm pretending that they don't exist when they do" (Chung "No One Knows If Joan Is Okay"). Wang's treatment of model minority traits is to "make [them]... as universal as possible", in a sense that her protagonist feels 'comfortable' in her state. Born and raised in the U.S., Joan, onto whom Wang possibly projects herself, is self-contained and at ease with being ordinary: "Who really wanted to be different? I wondered. And to be treated differently for things about them that couldn't be

⁵ The unnamed narrator in her *Chemistry* is a PhD student in chemistry at Boston University; the protagonist Keru in *Rental House* is a successful financier. Protagonists in Wang's short stories are also in high-status professions.

changed. Most people who were different just wanted to be the same” (Wang 91-2). Joan and Wang’s generation is different from their immigrant parents’ or Fang’s 1.5 generation: coming to the U.S. very young, they are aware of their double experience as well as the change and dedicate themselves to getting rid of their immigrant identity and always feel “the need to prove something” (Chai “Weike Wang with May-Lee Chai). But there is no common ground between Joan and her brother for her to understand such a necessity. Ultimately, she sees herself as an American citizen, an ethnic Chinese, the daughter of immigrants but not an immigrant herself, and she feels assured about this position.

By comparing the three authors Chinese uses, I am not making a value judgement; I am simply mapping differences in the three authors’ uses of Chinese to discern changing patterns in Chinese American writing and Chinese Americanness from 1980s to the present. It is risky to generalise from only three authors—especially while omitting other representative writers—but I contend that at least a tendency is discernible: Chinese American writing is becoming a more inclusive field that embraces diverse narrative styles and individual voices, and Chinese American authors enjoy greater latitude in defining what counts as a Chinese American story. Earlier I pointed out that Ma’s use of Chinese appears limited, yet her story does not; as she, in Shelley’s voice, addresses readers: “You’re worried for me. You, whoever you are. Citizen of the World (since you’re reading this)” (Ma 27). This monologue speaks to the present cosmopolitan orientation of Chinese American writing: it is addressed to citizens of the world.

Chapter Two

English, Chinese, and the Cadence of Silence: Representing Gender Identities in Chinese American fiction

This chapter analyses language and gender in the three novels. Here, I do not claim that either of the languages discussed—Chinese and English—is inherently gendered; rather, any ‘gender’ attributed to language is contingent, determined by the fictional plots and relevant social contexts. Nor does a language’s gender valence always align with how its speech community is perceived in terms of gender: for example, China, historically viewed through U.S. eyes, is constructed as the Other, “designated as [having] the ‘feminine’ quality of passivity” (Chow, *Women and Chinese Modernity* 5), whereas in the three novels under analysis Chinese often functions as an oppressive language. As Rey Chow argues, China has traditionally been configured by the West as the passive Object while the West—here specifically the U.S.—is counterposed as the Subject that openly embraces liberation, especially feminist liberation.

If the same logic were applied to language, the reader could expect Chinese to be a passive language and English an active one, and this relative linguistic passivity and activity occasionally manifests in gender relations. I instead argue for the constructed gender relations between Chinese and American English in the literary context by pointing out that both languages can embody patriarchal oppressions, and at other times, in contrast, enlightenment and liberation. The relation between the two languages also changes: one does not necessarily triumph over the other. The volatile gender relations implied by the two languages, I contend, originate from the

constructedness of gender as well as language. To better address such constructedness, I apply Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity to demonstrate how code-switching in the three novels constructs and performs gender. I discern neither language as the panacea for gender inequality, but will focus on arguing how languages are used to negotiate cultural and gender stereotypes. I also treat silence as a form of language and examine the close association between silence and gender across the texts. I distinguish silence as a theme from silence as a narrative technique to examine how the distinction can inflect in the characters' gender performance.

Gendered Dynamics between English and Chinese

Joy Luck Club interweaves seven narrative voices: those of four American daughters and their three Chinese-born mothers. The mothers recount both their present lives in America and their past lives in China. In each mother's narration, at least one Chinese expression flickers in memory, epitomising her earlier life in China, a life that is repeatedly defined by the marginalisation of women, that they were treated as "objects to be invested in or bartered" (Grunewold 37) due to their "forced transfer from natal to other families through the practice of arranged marriage, concubinage, adoption, and pawning" (Heung 601). One striking example is Ying-Ying St Clair's association of "*kai gwa*"—literally "cutting open the watermelon," here denoting the taking of a girl's virginity—with her tragic first marriage in China. At a family gathering, a man, whom Ying-Ying later marries, sexually teases Ying-Ying by "cutting open the melon", the action hinting at deflowering her. Ying-Ying discovers her husband's infidelity during her pregnancy, and she avenges by aborting their son wrapping the lifeless baby in newspaper and

throwing him into a lake. For Ying-Ying, “*kai gwa*” triggers this series of memories, thus encapsulating the unspeakable guilt and shame she left behind in China.

Inasmuch as this sexualised Chinese phrase signifies forced marriage in China, the sexual harassment and abuse Ying-Ying has suffered, her shame, fear and regret are bonded to a Chinese phrase. Most importantly, when she relives these horrible feelings, she relives them in Chinese.

Similarly, in “Magpies,” An-Mei recalls her adoption into a wealthy merchant’s family where her mother is forced to become the fourth concubine of the merchant. The episode hinges on a pair of Chinese homophones: sì (四, “four”) and sǐ (死, “death”) (Tan Romanises the Pinyin as *sz*). Although their tones differ only slightly, the two words have totally different meanings. An-Mei’s mother sees her concubinage as a source of shame and suffering, the pain so intense for her that she ultimately commits suicide. By putting together concubinage—specifically, by making An-Mei’s mother the fourth concubine—and death, Tan plays deliberately with the homophones. In one scene, An-Mei’s mother cries,

You can see now, a fourth wife is less than a fifth wife... Your mother was not always Fourth Wife, *Sz Tai*!” She said this word, *sz*, so hatefully I shuddered. It sounded like the *sz* that means “die.” And I remember Popo once telling me four is a very unlucky number because if you say it in an angry way, it always comes out wrong. (Tan, *Joy Luck Club* 195)

Being “*Sz Tai*”—the fourth wife, dead wife—casts an ominous shadow over An-Mei’s mother’s fate and foreshadows her death. Three days before a Chinese New Year, An-Mei’s mother commits suicide, the action conflating the meanings of the two ‘*sz*’. The pair of Chinese homophones thus signifies the causality behind the old patriarchal ritual and women’s misfortune, even the deadliness they encounter. Like Ying-Ying, An-Mei links this memory to Chinese.

While her mother’s suicide deeply unsettles An-Mei, it meanwhile sharpens her

perception and moulds her character. Her mother's death has taught An-Mei not to swallow suffering but to "learn to shout" (206), which means to claim her strength and defiance. An-Mei remains haunted by the pair of Chinese characters: later, when in the U.S, she reads an article about Chinese peasants who are deeply bothered by the magpies clapping, banging pots, and shouting "*Sz! Sz! Sz!*—Die! Die! Die!" to kill the taunting magpies, she "shout[s] for joy" (207-08). The story is improbable, even mythical, and breeds An-Mei's gruesome joy, but her re-encounter with the Chinese homophones reminds An-Mei of her metamorphosis from a submissive Chinese girl into a woman of resolve. Her joy also possibly originates from the articulation of the character: although An-Mei and her mother are fully aware of their sufferings, they never tell their stories out loud to other people, and the link between the Chinese words and oppression stays private. About her mother's death, An-Mei thinks "[t]here is nothing more to understand...[She] had no choice. [She] could not speak up" (207). But now, reading how the oppressed do not have to swallow their pain and can articulate their demands, An-Mei feels pleased, not insomuch as that the language or the articulation of '*sz*' dismantles the oppression, but at least that it is possible for her to tell her mother's tragedy and show the perseverance.

Hidden in An-Mei's joy is her will to bring her private misery out into the public sphere. She is one of the four mothers who carry their miseries and fears and come to the U.S. hoping, paradoxically, both to sever themselves from their Chinese past and to hold on to it, and they noticeably long to "tell [their] daughter[s] [their past]...in perfect American English" (1). This impulse enshrines English as a language of freedom and salvation: for these women, American English becomes the medium through which they can speak openly and claim their desires. Lindo, for

example, has learned to manoeuvre in English to pursue what she wants. When Lindo first arrives in the U.S., she works days in a fortune-cookie factory and attends night-school grammar classes. The ‘Chinese sayings’ in the cookies such as “Do not fight and air your dirty laundry in public. To the victor go the spoils” or “Money is a bad influence. You become restless and rob graves”, seem ridiculous to her because “these [English] things don’t make sense” and “we [Chinese] never say such things” (226). Nonetheless, she draws a marriage proposal from her future husband, Tin, through a fortune cookie whose slip reads, “A house is not home when a spouse is not at home” (228). Pretending the cookie is a random gift, she prompts Tin: “What does it say?” (228). The next day she receives the reply she hoped for: “He asked me in English, ‘Lindo, can you spouse me?’ ... and that is how we decided to get married” (228–29). Because Chinese custom forbids a woman to propose, Lindo takes a tactical detour: she uses the cookie and, more importantly, she uses another language, which “allows Lindo to determine her future” (Dunick 9). In this context, English frees her from the restrictions traditionally imposed on women by Chinese tradition and makes her the subject of her own choice. Her agency stands in sharp contrast to her marriage in China, in which she is betrothed to the wealthy Huang family at the age of sixteen and is treated as a servant. In comparison with Ying-Ying’s story of the sexist Chinese language, Lindo’s experience associates English with freedom.

Despite this liberal aura that American English carries, Tan does not assign an unequivocally positive value to the language: the English-speaking daughters fare no better in their self-selected marriages. Lena’s marriage to Harold—once making her feel “awful lucky”—survives on their “equal” contract to split every bill, even though Harold earns far more, ironically because Lena has stepped back and taken

on the invisible labour and emotional labour to protect his male ego (Tan, *Joy Luck Club* 130). Lena's labour does not pay back as per their equal marriage contract: Harold bases his success on Lena's invisible labour which is far more demanding than Harold's business work, but the contract shadows Lena's efforts, returning her less than she deserves. The agreed 'equality' has been the sugarcoating to cover the gender hierarchy within the marriage, which alarms and upsets Lena. That point notwithstanding, she sticks to the illusion of equality to maintain the peaceful state of her marriage until, prompted by her mother, she finally tells Harold she has always hated ice cream, an item for which they have long paid equally. She informs Harold in English, but Harold then "looks at [her], as if [she], too, were speaking Chinese and he could not understand" (134). Lena's distaste for ice cream reveals that Harold has misconstrued the equality in their marriage and that gender inequality still prevails in their American marriage.

The individual experiences of the mothers as well as their daughters crystallise the fluid associations between language and gender: neither Chinese nor American English is gendered, whereas both languages are arbitrarily yet constantly interrelated to patriarchy as well as female liberation. I explain this volatility in light of Butler's gender performativity. Butler suggests that the gendered identity is "a compelling illusion, an object of *belief*" and points out that "what is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo" ("Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" 520, original emphasis). To Butler, gender is hardly a reified form but a performative action in its process; it is "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 45). By way of the repeated

stylisation of the body surveilled and monitored by punishment, gender performance becomes a ritual. Butler further combines the ritualisation of gender performance with Louis Althusser's "interpellation"⁶. Butler pinpoints "ritual" as the counterpart in Althusser's interpellation, that an interpellative ideology "has a 'ritual' form" in a materially productive perspective, that in parallel with interpellation, the ritualized actions produce the belief in gender performance. I here concretise the interpellative ideology in *Joy Luck Club* as patriarchy in both China and the U.S. which governs the female characters' gender performance, and I explore the relation between such performativity and their uses of language.

On her mother's tragic death, An-Mei makes no further comments than "My mother, she suffered...[but t]hat was China...That was their fate" (Tan, *Joy Luck Club* 207). An-Mei's resignation unveils the temporal indictment of China: the ritualised sufferings of Chinese women. "China" and "their fate", alluding to the feudal patriarchal ideology, interpellate the Chinese women to suffer from gender oppression as one way to perform their femininity, which moreover constitutes and consolidates the interpellative patriarchal ideology. I want to particularly highlight here that such ritualisation and constitution are processed in Chinese; the language then serves as a speech act which carries the interpellative function. In An-Mei's and Ying-Ying's specific cases, Chinese characters ('sz') and phrases ('kai gwa') trigger their traumatic memories in an individual way, but from a broader perspective, they signify how historically, gender ideology in China has required a woman to perform her femininity in that socio-cultural sphere. In this vein, the phenomenon that

⁶ Althusser defines "interpellation" as follows: "I shall then suggest that ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals [it recruits them all], or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects [it transforms them all] by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police [or other] hailing: 'Hey, you there!' (Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses [Notes Towards an Investigation]" 86).

Chinese *represents* patriarchal oppression is an illusion, as Chinese is only the conduit for gender performativity and the constituting interpellative ideology of patriarchy. The language does not represent gender; it provides the field where interpellation happens (that Chinese women perform femininity by suffering). As the vessel, language per se is perpetually associated with gender but meanwhile remains ungendered.

That notwithstanding, language is an ideological realm, and the ideology behind language nurtures its speakers' habit and tendency to obey the patriarchal interpellation and to perform their genders. Therefore, when An-Mei and Ying-Ying speak and think in Chinese, they unconsciously, or even involuntarily, reify a patriarchal language. This also explains the mothers' impulse to emancipate themselves by revealing their past in English: because English can provide a new linguistic environment where the mechanism of gender performance has been unknown to them, and they wrongly believe that a different ideological apparatus would function in the U.S. through American English. The mothers' ignorance of English in ideological terms enables them to break from the gender performance that happens in both languages.

Lindo pertinently exemplifies this: when she prompts the proposal from Tin in English, she attributes the performative female humility and passivity to the Chinese linguistic sphere and leaves them behind. Initially entering the Anglophone realm as a new immigrant to whom everything American is unfamiliar, Lindo has still 'learned' how to perform her gender and is linguistically *in medias res*. It is exactly at this moment that the opportunity emerges for her to act as herself rather than perform any external beliefs, since she has not known the new ideological beliefs. Here Lindo speaks more of an intermediary language between Chinese and English,

the language releasing freedom and allowing her to make her own choices, which is Tan's conscious strategy to connect English with the concept of 'a liberating language'. The logic that language is a realm of the interpellative ideology ergo gender performativity can likewise be applied to English. The American daughters, growing up speaking only American English, perform ritualised notions of gender in English, just as their mothers do in Chinese. The marital inequality Lena struggles to deal with proves this, and at the same time crystallises the gender beliefs behind English: that is, a similarly repressive patriarchal ideology.

Butler concurrently argues for a historical situating of the body, which is an effect of the ritualised gender performance, that the body is "a continual and incessant *materializing* of possibilities", and it "*is* a historical situation...a manner of doing, dramatizing, and *reproducing* a historical situation" (Butler, "Performative Acts" 521, original emphasis). Butler stresses the regulatory, fictional constructedness of body and "the possibility of contesting" (520) via constantly citing bodily norms; I here focus on the historicity of gender-as-performance and use it to interpret the characters' behavioural changes, and I refer historically to the fluid living conditions of the earlier immigrants and the generational changes. To assimilate, the mothers need to speak English and settle down linguistically, the assimilation requiring their participation in the interpellative gender politics. I examine Ying-Ying's silence in her second marriage in this light: after escaping her first tragic marriage, Ying-Ying marries Clifford St. Clair, an Irish American, and moves to the U.S. with him. Language remains a barrier: Ying-Ying speaks Mandarin and little English, while her husband knows "only a few canned Chinese expressions" and insists she learn English (Tan, *Joy Luck Club* 83). Even though Ying-Ying never speaks English fluently, she conforms to the language hierarchy and lets Clifford "put words in her

mouth” (83). Ying-Ying has idealised her journey to the new environment as promisingly liberatory. Nonetheless, the environment she assimilates into is essentially another patriarchal system which expects her to perform her gender. When the U.S. environment becomes familiar to them, Ying-Ying and other mother figures start to constitute another set of historical rules of gender performance. My aim here is not to criticize their assimilative stance, but to underline the interpellative gender ideologies in China and the U.S. that bear plenty of similarities and are only presented differently through the active interactions between languages and gender.

The generational differences likewise exhibit the historicity of the ritualised gender performance. Immigrant mothers bear later generations on U.S. soil and thereby inscribe them into the U.S. gender ideology where those later generations perform as well as resist the imperatives of gender. This situation echoes in Weike Wang’s novel *Joan Is Okay* (2022), in which the reflection of how languages are afflicted with gendered cultures remains prominent. The novel’s title articulates an answer to the plot’s events, insofar as “no one else in the book believes that Joan is mostly content with her life” other than Joan herself (Chung “No One Knows”). Others constantly meddle in Joan’s life: in her family, Joan’s mother lectures her on how to be a woman; her brother Fang keeps acting as the family’s surrogate patriarch and trying to educate Joan on her life decisions; Joan’s sister-in-law Tami is consumer-obsessed and wants to make Joan’s appearance more conventionally feminine. Joan excels in her workplace, but the medical field in general is not quite receptive to her as an Asian woman. For example, some patients need to know Joan was born in the U.S. and that English is her first language to feel assured about her expertise while her youngest, white male colleague Reese could easily “[make] it onto the brochures, form his good relations with HR” (61). Her devotion to her

career is even perceived as a deficiency in her personality, when Reese, fragile and unable to handle his failed promotion, excuses his idleness and underperformance as “I’m not Joan”, who seems to him to work too hard (88). Back at her apartment, her white male neighbour Mark is always trying to change her ways of living by unilaterally decorating her apartment and exposing her to ‘the New York life/culture’ he conceptualises. In an interview, Wang has explained that “with Mark, it’s gendered... he’s mansplaining certain aspects of life” (Chung “No One Knows”).

Joan is second-generation, like the American daughters in *Joy Luck Club*. They are English native speakers and their emotional upheavals are more engaged with the American context, their behaviour born of U.S. ideological beliefs. An exceptional situation that entwines womanhood with Chinese resides in Joan’s conversations with her mother. Unlike the mother-daughter pairs in Tan’s fiction, Joan maintains a less interactive relationship with her mother. “For the past eighteen years,” Joan recalls, “calls with my mother were purely information-driven,” a remark that highlights their emotional distance (Wang 43). Joan reflects on this point when, after her father’s death and Fang’s COVID-related decision to house their mother in Connecticut, her mother suddenly phones merely to chat. Because they speak in Chinese, Joan ponders the verb to chat and its Chinese equivalent, *liáo tiān*—literally “to gab about the sky”: “and even when we lived in the same house, it was not like her to find me just to chat” (43). To Joan, her mother’s *liáo tiān* could have signalled closeness, until the call shifts to moral instruction on womanhood: “I would’ve chatted with you before, but I didn’t want to waste your time... you should thank me for being your mother and not a burden on your life,” because only without such a burden, her mother maintains, can Joan become a woman who “must make her own money, because without money there is no power, and a woman must have

power” (43–44). The lesson is later echoed when her mother suggests that Tami is “not a woman” because she no longer works: “Why study so hard... just to marry and be a mom?” (98). Joan’s mother has spent the former half of her life paving the way for her children’s prosperity which she measures by their earned fortune. To her, individuals’ efforts anchor their fortunes, and their fortunes promise their success because the U.S. and the values it mandates warrant such a pattern. Crystallised here is Joan’s mother’s materialist definition of womanhood that Joan finds difficult to accept; my purpose here is not to make a value judgement but to uncover how Joan’s mother conceptualises gender.

When Joan’s parents immigrate to the U.S., they barely speak English. The only jobs open to them are thus menial ones: dishwashing, newspaper delivery, house cleaning. Joan remembers accompanying her mother to clean houses, translating for her, and “watch[ing] the wife watch my mother” (70). The American wife, who owns the “family’s large dining table” and need not spare her effort on physical labour, has these trivial worries about Joan’s mother’s service: “Is that eco-friendly cleaner you’re using? No phthalates or ammonia?” (70). Joan’s mother’s emphasis on the economic nature of womanhood is likely to be stimulated by scenes like this: an American woman who conveys her concerns in complex English vocabulary about a high-quality life that immigrants have yet to reach, questions Joan’s mother, a woman struggling to make every dollar. I here bring in the social context aligning with this plot to examine Joan’s mother’s psychology: this incident likely happens in the 1990s, a period when second-wave feminism in the U.S. was being replaced and renewed by third-wave feminism which is tied to women’s financial freedom and independence. Advocacy for women’s workplace and economic rights occurred hand in hand with propaganda about the American dream and successful immigrant

stories. Joan's mother's notion of womanhood is possibly the product of this ideological dyad, and it is significant that she articulates it in Chinese because only an immigrant woman whose native language is not English and who never truly owns English faces this dilemma of double coercion: to perform as an immigrant and to perform as a woman.

Her children, especially Fang, similarly perform such apparatus. Fang responds proactively to interpellations of the American dream. He works upwards to a higher economic stratum and lives a luxurious lifestyle of conspicuous consumption. He performs hard to successfully live the “sojourners-turned-settlers” story in the U.S. and frequently attempts to talk Joan into his big picture of American success (Maxey 32). As a 1.5-generation immigrant, Fang lives in English as well as Chinese: when he speaks English, he plays hard by the assimilation rules to prove that his ties to the U.S. are as tight as to China, and when he speaks Chinese—especially when he addresses Joan, whom he habitually calls by her Chinese name *Jiù-ān* (就安), “the Chinese-ification of Joan” (51)—he follows the Chinese belief of collectivism, performing as the surrogate patriarch and lecturing Joan. That duality, however, does not grant Fang the exemption from the repressive gender rituals in both languages. Joan is fluent in Chinese, but she hardly ever defaults to Chinese. Therefore, the language does not exert as much interpellative power on her as English does. While she can understand her mother's and her brother's words, such an understanding stays on the semantic surface.

By pointing out the disjointed understandings between Joan and her family, I do not mean she is shielded from gender interpellation. A native English speaker by default, she also pursues her notion of womanhood: Fang's lecture on American success provokes Joan to think, “[w]as it harder to be a woman? Or an immigrant?”

and thus to settle down? Because “[a] daughter of immigrants is the daughter of guests, is a part-time guest herself, and the best kind of guest goes with the flow. She stays in a guesthouse” (162). The ‘guest’ metaphor resonates with Sau-Ling Wong’s image of Asian Americans as the “permanent houseguests in the house of America”: only when they behave well are they allowed “to prove the viability of American egalitarian ideals”, but ultimately they remain unadmitted and unassimilable (*Reading Asian American Literature* 16). Joan regards herself as the daughter of immigrants, complicating the American assimilative ideology with gender performance. More than the son, the daughter of immigrants is the guest of the guests, the image implying a double alienness which Joan designates as her meaning of womanhood, which denotes “an astructural outside, the ‘other’ of the other” (Chow, *Women and Chinese Modernity* 15). Joan’s native English environment still enjoins her to perform as a passive receptacle because she is a woman; people in that New York world put their words and opinions into her and present their intervention as care, kindness, and salvation.

Joan’s new neighbour Mark has no sense of boundaries and keeps invading her personal space. In one particularly ironic scenario, Mark prejudicially misconceives Joan’s bereavement leave as her being bullied and suspended at work and immediately assumes she was bullied because she is an Asian woman, feeling a vicarious anger: “In the last few months, any strife at work?” (Wang 141), Mark asks, a micro-aggressive question closely linked to his white male privilege, and he hardly believes that Joan has not been bullied in her workplace: “You’re a woman of color in a male-dominated field and you haven’t experienced any strife?” (141). Mark’s question introduces the contemporary form of the racial-gender stereotype in the U.S., that a minority is ‘supposed to’ be the victim of discrimination, and a white

man should offer his power as white saviour. I here argue for a strengthened tie between this contemporary interpellation and American English by pointing out that “the white saviour industry” (Cole “The White-Savior Industrial Complex”) is a U.S. signature, mandated by the nation’s propaganda of equality and liberty. Had not Joan and Mark both spoken American English—had they not been hailed by the same belief in the U.S. evangelical narrative—such a conversation would be less likely to happen.

The white saviour complex also appears in *Joy Luck Club*. Rose fantasises a love tragedy between her and her husband Ted, especially after Ted’s mother tries to preempt their marriage, and heroises Ted as her saviour: “I was victim to his hero. I was always in danger and he was always rescuing me. I would fall and he would lift me up. It was exhilarating and draining. The emotional effect of saving and being saved was addicting to both of us” (Tan, *Joy Luck Club* 125). Noticeably, Rose practises her compliance by renouncing her right to speak up and succumbing to what Ted’s English conveys: all their discussions always boil down to Rose saying “What should we do?” and “Ted, you decide” (126). Both Ted’s acting as the white savior and Rose’s embrace of it are driven by the intersection of U.S. racial and gender norms. Similarly, Mark’s question and his following diatribe on racism repetitively conforms to these interpellative norms.

Silence as Resistance

Joan reacts differently from Rose: to Mark’s intervention, Joan just “want[ed] to put my head in my hands. Then with my head and ears covered, I want[ed] to walk out of my apartment and go somewhere else” (Wang 142). Instead of exchanging opinions with Mark, Joan chooses to avoid any discussion or confrontation—not

only resisting Mark, but also all the external narratives. In response to her mother's and Fang's lecturing, Joan habitually evades responses or dodges the topics that Fang says to her, "You've always been like this" (159). To avoid Mark, Joan leaves her apartment and 'hides' in Fang's house. I see Joan's avoidance as a form of silence. Wang's choice to characterise Joan through silence seemingly clashes with her literary foremothers'—here, for example, Tan's—efforts to break the silence imposed on women. In the polyphonic *Joy Luck Club*, all narrators have a strong, urgent will to break the silence and tell their stories: the mothers share an eagerness to recount their "unspeakable tragedies" (Tan, *Joy Luck Club* 20) across the Pacific Ocean, and the daughters long for effective communication and mutual understanding with their mothers. For the women in *Joy Luck Club*, speaking out heals their psychological wounds and enhances "self-affirmation and individual empowerment" (Heung 607). To express their stories is to move their "inward knowledge to intersubjective dialogue," engaging the listeners—the daughters, the mothers, and readers—in the storytelling (Heung 608).

This intersubjectivity extends beyond the text: as I argued in my last chapter, *Joy Luck Club* is, to a large extent, Tan telling her mother Daisy's life stories as her agential voice. The book's reputation as a cornerstone of Asian American literature also stems from "clearly succeed[ing] at giving a legitimate voice to the Chinese immigrant mothers" (Dunick 15) as well as feeding "Asian American women, many of whom are hungry for validation of their own experiences as daughters of immigrant mothers" (Wong, "Sugar Sisterhood" 179). Further, in a cultural-feminist context, *Joy Luck Club*, as Wong reads it, is "China mama's revenge": Chinese American female writers' retaliation against misogynist male writers' muzzling and misportrayal of their Chinese women characters as well as of their coeval female

writers (176).

On the other hand, while *Joy Luck Club* has been credited as a role model in breaking silences in Asian American women's writing, celebrations of secrecy and silence simultaneously lurk in the novel. Thus Waverly, looking back on her memories of playing chess, learns from Lindo that the key to winning lies in silence: "A little knowledge withheld is a great advantage one should store for future use. That is the power of chess. It is a game of secrets in which one must show and never tell" (Tan, *Joy Luck Club* 73). Furthermore, although Ying-Ying for a long time holds her agony to herself because "'*shwo buchulai*'—words cannot come out" due to language barriers, she quietly observes her surroundings and can prophetically "know a thing before it happens" (83, 217). At these moments, Tan "finds reasonable explanations for silence," whereas other Asian American women writers—Kingston, for example⁷—may find "perverseness and confusion" (Ling 135). In this vein, Tan subverts the passive status of silence and equates it with hidden power.

I would also argue here for the power in Joan's silence which I read as protest, a refusal to speak both Chinese and English to avoid being interpellated by the beliefs driving the two languages. Butler considers gender as "an enactment that performatively constitutes the appearance of its own interior fixity", and to participate in such constitution is "a fantasy of literalization or a *literalizing fantasy*" (*Gender Trouble* 32, original emphasis). I understand speaking the hailing authority's language as one concrete way of such literalisation, and under this aspect, Joan uses silence to opt out of the ritual of gender performativity: since to speak either English or Chinese is to fall into the trap of state coercion, she keeps silent and

⁷ Kingston in *The Woman Warrior* writes: "sometimes I hated the secrecy of Chinese. 'Don't tell,' said my parents, though we couldn't tell if we wanted to because we didn't know." See Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*. Alfred Knopf, 1977, pp. 183.

rejects to conform to the gendered social rules.

Unlike Rose, Joan does not relinquish her rights and submit to others by her silence: after all, she still expresses her insights via her interior monologue. Her silence suggests her wish to be invisible in the sense that she wishes to evacuate herself from the hierarchy, where being an Asian woman means to be inferior. To be invisible, in this context, diverts from Frank Chin's interpretation of invisibility as "a matter of being ignored and excluded" (*Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* xxv) to Joan's vision of her simple, quotidian life being a regular doctor, an ordinary New Yorker, and an American individual. As I have analysed in my former chapter, being different—even in a complimentary sense—makes Joan uneasy. She resists such uneasiness through her silence, her severance from languages that embody a particular gender ideology.

Kathryn Ma's *The Chinese Groove* (2023) deals with the interrelations between language, silence, and gender quite differently, one reason being that it is the only text in this study that has a male protagonist. Language and gender interconnect in a less complicated way compared with the other two texts: the recurrent pivotal Chinese phrase *lao jia* is loaded with the protagonist Shelley's urge to make his home in the U.S., and as mentioned earlier, he glues this phrase and his notion of home to the big American success. Gender performativity manifests more directly here: a man successfully performs his gender by his fully-fledged establishment of a decent life. Shelley is also distinctively willing to play along with such a gendered notion, so much so that from China to the U.S. and eventually back to China, he constantly attempts to locate *lao jia* and the gender politics it embodies.

My main focus remains on silence in *Chinese Groove*, as silence is put under the

spotlight as a major theme in the novel. The Chinese groove per se, according to Shelley, is “a kind of knowledge, passed *wordlessly* through the ages and residing in the bones” of his fellow countrymen (Ma 6, my emphasis). It is an unsaid rule and a mutual understanding that fellow countrymen should help each other out. Peculiar in the rationale of the Chinese groove is that when he needs help, he does not speak up and ask; rather, he waits in silence for the helper, another countryman in the groove, to notice the dilemma and voluntarily offer help. Such silence therefore connotes a male gendered connection and functions to manifest as a gender norm that requires Chinese men to conform. Shelley appreciates such “art of Oriental silence, that language of [the] exquisitely unexpressed” (45) and actively engages with such performance. He believes that the Chinese groove will provide him with all the help he needs without his seeking it, that it is only natural Eddie, his Chinese American friend, lets him stay at his place, and the Yunnanese waiter he meets in a restaurant delivers his message to his father during the waiter’s visit to Yunnan. Between him and his uncle Ted, the tie seems tighter. Although unable to host Shelley longer than two weeks, Ted silently offers other help on a smaller scale so that Shelley can fare better. For example, he gives Shelley his old clothes but claims he is only getting rid of them; he secretly gives Shelley his transit card but also reminds him not to tell Ted’s Jewish American wife Aviva as “she might...misunderstand”, and Shelley takes the card, “thankful once again for the Chinese groove” (26, 45).

Instantly indicated in Ted and Shelley’s conversation is another consensus that the tacit silence excludes Aviva and women in general, and that they cannot understand and thus cannot partake in this homosocial closeness. Shelley cherishes the idea of silent communication as the insider knowledge to which only Chinese men have access. In their discussion regarding Henry and Ted’s complicated father-son

relationship, Aviva praises Shelley for breaking the ice between Henry and Ted: “You got them talking again... if a person isn’t willing to share his feelings, he never finds out what the other person thinks” (71). Hearing this, however, Shelley only “felt sorry for Aviva, *unschooled* in the Chinese groove”, because as per the silent Chinese groove rule, “Ted and Henry knew exactly what the other was thinking” (72, my emphasis). Shelley’s and Aviva’s contrasting attitudes toward silence are, in Ma’s novel, closely associated with their genders: men prefer silence, while women are loquacious.

Indeed, Aviva lives by a quite different communicative mode. In her family, “we talk about *everything*. We don’t stay bottled up. We end up screaming at each other, but at least it clears the air” (72, original emphasis). She is a vocal character who advocates the power of speech, contending that people “should talk. How else can we support one another? Openness is good” (70). In opposition to the silent Chinese groove, Aviva believes in the American way of talking things out and makes her efforts as a liaison in getting Ted to talk to Henry. ““My daughter-in-law wastes a lot of effort trying to get my son and me to talk””, says Henry, who, as one of the men in the Chinese groove, thinks he and Ted “don’t have anything to say to each other” (74). Noticeably, the loquacious women become a ubiquitous image in the novel: Shelley’s Chinese aunties in Yunnan are depicted as garrulous, as they tell tall stories which turn out to be a far cry from the reality—they circulate the faux story about Ted’s large department store and an abundant American life—and gossip over others’ mishaps: Ted’s family tragedy, that his mother and son were killed in a car accident, “gave the aunties a transpacific thrill... They didn’t have the details but at least they had a tragedy to hand round and round” (11). Privileging silence, Shelley and other men in the Chinese groove appear to hold hostility toward these vocal women.

Shelley, for instance, is particularly critical about Aviva's storytelling skills, judging her ways of expression are "boring those kids [at the library] to death" (86); to his aunties, he becomes even more vehement, even sex-ageist, thinking their life is one without principles, which is "only for rats and aunties" (28).

By elevating silence above open expression, *Chinese Groove* adopts the gender politics that male silence is a powerful cultural code. The men in the groove celebrate silence as a Chinese art, a ritual, and a coded communication that is endemic to men. It is possible that Ma intends to utilise such celebration to eulogise the power of silence, echoing Cheung's idea that "silence can also be articulation" (*Articulate Silences* 21). Nevertheless, such celebration does not hold throughout the novel but is more than often self-contradictory: while the novel foregrounds the power of silence, some plots paradoxically suggest the necessity to break the silence. As discussed earlier, silence likewise in *Joy Luck Club* exists within particular dynamics: silence for the female characters is a plight to face and challenge, in tandem with which, however, these women occasionally wield silence to retaliate against a harsh reality; silence is therefore repudiated as well as embraced. Additionally, Tan implicitly uses silence as a narrative technique. Since Suyuan Woo died before the novel's narration starts, she remains silent as the absent presence, and her daughter June is thus her surrogate voice. Suyuan's absence nonetheless makes her presence more salient, as June now has to search for Suyuan's cum her own identity through reminiscing mother. Catherine Romagnolo terms June's surrogate narrative of Suyuan as "Thematic Origins", a narrative paradigm she defines as "[t]he topic of origins or beginnings when it is interrogated or explored by the characters, narrator, or by the author her/himself", which in *Joy Luck Club* manifests as "a compulsion to recover the defining moment of one's identity" but at the same

time a refusal of “the possibility of such a recovery”, because the truth is veiled by Suyuan’s death and silence (92, 101).

Ma’s treatment of ‘silence’ differs. She stages the power of silence as the central theme even as her characters navigate through incidents by breaking the silence. Shelley, who is proud of his expertise in the male art of silence, paradoxically mediates other characters’ relationships by helping break the silence and launch conversations. When Shelley moves in with Henry to look after him, he immediately undertakes the responsibility of a liaison to exchange information between Henry and Ted. He updates Ted and Aviva on Henry’s health conditions and passes Henry information regarding Ted’s job hunting. In one scene, Aviva and Ted’s friend Kate and her family face housing difficulties, so Aviva invites the family to live with her and Ted, which means Kate’s son Leo will sleep in Eli’s (Aviva and Ted’s dead son) room. Ted, not able to get over the trauma, initially does not accept such an arrangement. Aviva thus brings in Shelley, who then brings in Henry to negotiate the matter. By bringing Henry and Ted into conversation, Shelley breaks the stalemate of silence between Henry and Ted. A more entailing detail is that in the negotiation, Ted is interrupted by Henry and retreats back home. Noticing this, Shelley later reminds Henry: ““You should’ve let him speak... Next time, let him speak”” (Ma 101-2).

Shelley now conversely champions speech, and this stance disturbs the gender norm of male silence he has been interpellated to believe. His conversion, however, does not signify a sweeping triumph of openness over silence. Rather, he counterbalances the two qualities throughout the novel. I analyse such contradiction by drawing a distinction between characters’ narratives and Ma’s actual writing. Among the three texts discussed in this dissertation, Ma’s is the only one that adopts the male protagonist and tells men’s story. This fictional world is acted out by a male

performativity and is dominated by the patriarchal ideology behind such performativity which meanwhile entails “the omission and misconceptions about women” (Showalter 182). Nonetheless, Ma’s writing intermittingly contests this idea: readers see Shelley shuttling between silence and his attempts at breaking the silence, and more importantly, he shuttles between the male gender performance and his desire to become the surrogate caretaker, a desire to perform as a female. When Shelley moves in with Henry to look after him, he chooses another haunted bedroom where “[l]ittle touches everywhere said Diana [Henry’s late wife, Ted’s mother]... It was as if Diana knew that a trainee poet would someday arrive to look after Henry” (Ma 79). Living in Diana’s room is thus less Shelley’s choice than his action of claiming the room, through which he attempts to become the surrogate Diana. In the room, he bows to Diana’s photo, “promising Diana that... I’d take care of Henry”, that he would take on Diana’s supposed responsibility and play *her* role (80).

Shelley’s role as the female agent is further accentuated by his failure to claim Eli’s room, a failure, if zoomed in, to become Ted and Aviva’s surrogate son. The door of Eli’s bedroom stays locked to Shelley, but when Aviva invites Kate’s family to live with them, she easily offers Kate’s son Leo the bedroom, which makes Shelley feel “a stab of annoyance. They wouldn’t unlock the door for me, but this four-year-old kid could come and go as he pleased” (79). Juxtaposed with his replacement of Diana, the failure to become a surrogate male character to some extent weakens his masculinity. To add another layer, the other role of female agent that Shelley undertakes is Leo’s mother: according to Aviva, Leo is having problems, because “[h]e won’t talk to anybody besides his mothers... he has issues... his silence isn’t normal” (96). However, Leo freely talks to Shelley to the point where Aviva asks Shelley, “what’s he doing talking to you? You get more out of him than

anyone” (105). And Shelley, by means of telling Leo Chinese folklore, tries to open Leo’s mouth and break his silence, and he succeeds, as “Leo, like Henry, asked for me every night” (114). By vocalising for Leo, Shelley again stands in opposition to the masculine standard of silence which he paradoxically used to adhere to, and since Leo only talks to his mothers, his communication with Shelley suggestively positions Shelley as a maternal role.

One crucial detail is that the folklore and legends Shelley tells are “called up from the depths of my childhood”, the ones “my mother had told to me” (114). The action of storytelling, which interrupts the silence, is therefore a maternally inherited practice through generations, which intertextually recalls the interlocked storytelling between Tan’s mothers and daughters. Shelley’s active participation in this storytelling signals a female role within him. Shelley’s femininity—which is “a negative quality in the scheme of patriarchal binary opposition” (Cheung, *Articulate Silence* 101)—slips out, dominates the narrative, and defamiliarises the male tradition, and the cadence of her thematic silence negotiates such femininity in what is ostensibly a man’s story.

In her discussion of sex and gender in Chinese American literature, Elaine Kim remarks that in some 1990s Chinese American novels, men and women “are vivid and concrete refutations of racist and sexist stereotypes” (213). As this chapter elaborates, such refutations have persisted to the present and are far from over. The Chinese American female characters discussed here—regardless of generation—fight for their subjectivity under racist and sexist pressure, pressure that sometimes even comes from their Chinese families or from fellow Chinese men. Drawing on Butler’s theory of gender performativity and Chow’s comments on gender, this

chapter treats language as a specific pathway through which these women claim subjectivity. Both languages under discussion are coded by gendered ideologies, and the female characters can strategically switch between them to resist the gender performance assigned to them. In certain cases, silence is also the women's way to "speak" back, because to remain silent is to refuse to be manoeuvred by gendered expectations. The silences analysed in this chapter do not amount to escapism: silence must be represented and written, and all three novels contribute to that representation. Especially in *Chinese Groove*, Ma depicts silence with a lurking urge to break it, reminding readers that silence and communication remain crucial issues in discussions of race, ethnicity, and gender.

Conclusion

This dissertation has accounted for how linguistic variations in Chinese American novels translate into Chinese Americanness. I examine the uses of Chinese pidgin English and code-switching in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, Weiwei Wang's *Joan Is Okay*, and Kathryn Ma's *The Chinese Groove* and argue that each author utilises Chinese to shape her characters' ethnic and gender identities. I take into consideration the three authors' intentions on their hybrid uses of Chinese: since the three authors have different life trajectories, their understandings of Chineseness and further their own Chinese Americanness are heterogeneous, which induces their various ways of using Chinese in their writings. The three authors, meanwhile, have complicatedly intimate relationships with their Chinese Americanness, as this positionality is always gendered. The intersection of ethnicity and gender urges the three female authors to deal with and write against sexism, and language uses are one of the domains they fight back. The three novels in their distinct ways negotiate a "between worlds condition... that is characteristic of all people in a minority position" and a patriarchy for which their writing is "not only an act of self-assertion but an act of defiance" (Ling 1, 177).

My first chapter explores how Chinese ethnicity is animated by the use of Chinese. I draw on the terms "going native" and "the melancholy turn" from Rey Chow's work to tease out how notions of Chinese Americanness resemble but also differ from one another in the three novels. My second chapter adds the layer of gender identity: through the lens of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, I argue that to use different languages is to conform to state ideologies which control gender performance. Specifically, I underline that at the moments when the protagonists are introduced to a new or less familiar language (in this study, English or Chinese), they

temporarily resist the gender performance because they do not have the knowledge (here, language and the ideology behind it) to perform the ideology. In the rift between the two languages exists silence, a theme as well as a narrative technique that closely interacts with gender. I focus on the dynamics between silence and gender, that is, how silence is often associated with feminine passivity yet can signify strength and resistance to gender interpellation. Ultimately, this dissertation is dedicated to arguing that the three authors adopt the Chinese language in very different ways and that, while their adoption of it consistently translates into identity formation, their differences more importantly signify the evolving notions of Chinese Americanness in both literature and reality.

Indeed, bringing in the authorial reality into my argument, my methodology stands in opposition to Roland Barthes' influential statement that "writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin ... [it] is ... where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost" (125). I reinstall Tan's personality into her text to demonstrate that the author's insertion of Chinese and its variant forms reflects her individualised Chinese Americanness. For Tan, her Chinese Americanness finds its best articulation in relation to the Chinese culture and history she claims and repurposes and through which her identity nonetheless attaches more to her expressivist writing of personal memories than to a general nationalist sentiment towards China. Building on this idea, I then highlighted that the Chinese-born Wang, as distinct from Tan, uses Chinese naturally and correctly. The plot in *Joan Is Okay* is fuelled by Wang's language play which entails Wang's more contemporary definition of being a Chinese American: to be at ease and in a state of security both as Chinese and American. This shift very likely originates from Wang's background. Unlike Tan's family, Wang's parents came to the U.S. in 1980s without

a turbulent past in China to build a brighter future for their child and successfully achieved their goal⁸. Feeling more secure about her ethnicity, Wang works towards different aims: her Chineseness is not mysteriously exotic thus incompatible with America—as happens with Tan and *Joy Luck Club*—rather, she pursues an intrinsic Chineseness which does not conflict but instead harmonises with her Americanness. In an oblique way, Wang answers the question Maxine Hong Kingston provocatively asked *The Woman Warrior* (1976):

Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies? (Kingston 10)

In other words, a Chinese American need no longer separate their Chineseness and Americanness. One's Chineseness does not necessarily refer to a tangible trauma from childhood or one's family; being a Chinese American means every current moment in which the individual lives their life. Chineseness is thus an innate flow: it is in Joan's mindset that she knows she is a good doctor and neither an ethnic Chinese nor an American citizen. These minute details rather than grand cultural narratives now speak for Chineseness.

Coeval with Wang, Kathryn Ma deals with Chinese language, experience, and culture quite differently. Based on her single trip to her father's place of origin, Yunnan Province in China, *Chinese Groove*'s narrative is most vociferous about representing Chinese tradition. Ma's use of Chinese—her phrase *lao jia* (hometown)—is deliberately a sentimental and cultural emblem. She is different from Wang in that her use of Chinese appears consistent, yet also relatively

⁸ I here refer to the educational and professional success. Wang graduated with a PhD in public health from Harvard University and holds an MFA from Boston University. She is also a recipient of multiple book prizes (*Weikewangwrites.com*).

inflexible because she hews to one particular phrase. As I mentioned earlier, Ma bears a more remote relation to China, which may explain why her knowledge of China and Chinese appears to be more restricted. That fact, nonetheless, does not rein in her intention or position in writing a Chinese story. *Chinese Groove* is also her ambitious attempt at writing her version of Voltaire's *Candide* (1759)⁹. Centring on just one Chinese phrase, Ma is trying to inscribe her story into a Western canon. The novel's linear structure and the protagonist Shelley's naïve personality notwithstanding, Ma's attempt at canon rewriting suggests the infinite openness and multidirectional flows within contemporary Chinese American fiction and the many choices a writer possesses. Her attempt also aligns with her rendering of the gendered silence that to break this silence is necessary and destined to happen. Ma's eagerness to tell the story and projection of that need onto her protagonist entails a continuation of Chinese American narration in more diverse, vibrant forms.

My examination of multilingual writing in Chinese American novels in this dissertation is significant for specifying the status quo of Chinese American literature, its progression, and its "concurrency": a term employed by Nina Morgan to acknowledge "the coexistence of different places (events, identities, etc.) in the world" and "the co-occurrence of their mobilities and developments" (Morgan 6). I place the three novels' bilingual writing within the idea of concurrency because it pertinently summarises these authors' language uses: namely, that they coexist—as in the market and in scholarship—and that they build upon others. I foreground this situation to further highlight the larger context of language uses within Chinese

⁹ In an interview with Eric Newman, Ma mentions when she wrote the novel, she had *Candide* in her mind. See "Kathryn Ma's 'The Chinese Groove'", *LARB*, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/av/kathryn-mas-the-chinese-groove/>. 23 January, 2023.

American writing today, a more diverse environment that guarantees writers more space and comfort to play with Chinese and English, by way of which, I contend, they can claim both languages and what they represent. Beyond the status of coexistence, Morgan's concurrency also

acknowledges that the dynamics at play (whether we are talking about power, race, sexuality, language, capital, events, etc.) are always unequalizable presences in their co-occurrence, not only to one another (and other others), but also in the face of what is to come as well as in light of the spectral past. (6)

This study aims to argue for the same idea: the uses of Chinese and multilingual writing fit well into this pattern. Even through the example of just three novels, readers can observe the 'unequalizability' of language uses—that they coexist harmoniously with each having distinctive features. In future Chinese American literature, such asymmetrical coexistence and innovative developments are foreseeable.

Anjuli Gunaratne suggests that “by shuttling between two critical, although unequal, linguistic nodal points (English and Chinese)”, “the East/West divide that is now structuring our global order anew” is challenged, because, in this process, other languages shape, undo, and remake English (564-65). This process therefore also bears linguistic varieties: English becomes impure due to the intervention of Chinese, but that impurity exactly hinges on the ‘concurrency’ and becomes the locus where diversity and multiculturalism prosper. *Joy Luck Club* was created during the time when Chineseness collided against the U.S. nationalism, while *Joan Is Okay* and *Chinese Groove* were written in a relatively stabilising period when Wang and Ma felt at ease to play with Chinese Americanness. However, the post-COVID era has seen increasing tension between the two nations, and despite U.S. presidential administrations having changed several times, “little progress has taken

place; if anything, distrust and disputes only deepened” (Yuan 8). Although one can argue that all interactions between nation-states are strategic—and while it is not my intention here to delve into U.S.-China relations—I do need to point out that even if such ‘rivalry’ or confrontations are strategic, the relationship between the two national bodies is being stress-tested, and what is, in the meantime, stress-tested is the identification of Chinese Americans, as well as their Chinese-Americanness. Nonetheless, from the other side, such tension proves that Chinese-Americanness is always evolving, deeply dependent on political context. If “the strength of the English language is in presenting the Americanness in its American variety”, as Braj Kachru proposes, “Let us, therefore, appreciate and encourage the Third World varieties of English too” (236). I here make the same appeal to Chinese uses in Chinese American writing: let Chinese uses open their broad arcs in Anglophone writing, too. They may be regarded by traditionalists as ‘inauthentic’ or ‘impure’, but in them a more nuanced, evolving Chinese Americanness can emerge and live on.

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