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David Leiwei Li

Maxine Hong Kingston's 1980 book *China Men* is a work that unequivocally engages the major canonical issues—the notion of America/Americanness, for one, either in its ideological or aesthetic sense, particularly captures her imagination.[1] She is "claiming America" in her Chinese American way and retelling "the American myth" as "poetically" and "truly" as William Carlos Williams's *In the American Grain* (Pfaff 1, 25). Picking up where Williams's precursor text left off in about 1850, Kingston has unfolded in *China Men* more than a century of Chinese American experience and constituted an oppositional voice to official American history. Kingston deliberately blurs the boundaries of history as the master record of events and the canon as the container of privileged literary texts, for she sees an analogy in the law of inclusion and exclusion operating in the structuring of both history and canon that needs to be dealt with simultaneously: the historical presence of a people is always intricately woven with its literary presence. *China Men* challenges the problematic democratic nationalism of the canonical paradigm and endeavors to write into the existing canon the possibilities of change within the canon itself.

Since America/Americanness is a geopolitical concept motivated by interests and materialized in canonical texts, historical as well as literary, Kingston has devised an agenda of what I call "the discovery of origins"—first establishing the root and the precedence of the concept for later redesignation, then tracing the formative hegemonic processes for adaptation and appropriation, and finally positing a set of advantageous relationships with the available canon that will valorize her own text's position—only to anchor the origin of America in her original formulation. This discovery procedure is a formal strategy hinged upon linguistic and textual mediation, subversion, and transformation. It is a discovery of given meanings and combinations of new meanings; it works out problems of culture in

words and signs; and it emerges with new perspectives on the American literary canon and American historical identity.

1

China Men's discovery begins with the exploration of affiliated texts whose thematic schemes are homologies to Kingston's text in conception. The invisibility of the ethnic in American society that pervades Ralph Ellison's social protest finds its continuity in Kingston's effort to give voice to the tributary subcultures of America. The debunking of the Puritan heritage contained in Williams's prose revision of American history informs Kingston's project of conceiving *her* American grain. Ellison and Williams have provided Kingston with successful revisionist strategies of both textual and ideological insertion into the non-Anglo component of the American literary canon. Associating her work with three canonized yet not firmly entrenched texts, Kingston has clearly related herself to the countertradition of the historically "emergent," whose antinomian strain has been incorporated and given new embodiments in the mainstream American culture.[2]

As Williams's study opens with a proclamation, "It has been my wish to draw from every source one thing, the strange phosphorus of the life, nameless under an old misappellation" (v), so Kingston begins her program of discovering America with a rectification of the name. Chinese Americans are to be addressed properly before they can actually register themselves in history. *China Men* is the name of Kingston's choice, not the pejorative "Chinamen," a stereotypical American concoction, but "China Men"—a literal English translation of Chinese characters, meaning, Chinese—who are also makers of American history.

Interestingly, *China Men* was not the original title of the book, and a review of its derivation shows us a good deal about the author's artistic as well as ideological deliberations. In a 1977 article in *Hawaii Review,* Kingston gives the proposed title of the book as *Gold Mountain Man* (43). Since "Gold Mountain" is the name nineteenth-century Chinese immigrants used to refer to the state of California, the designation of the book had an obvious regional flavor and ethnic appeal. It might also conform to a stereotype that the Chinese were no more than gold diggers who rushed here only to rob the wealth of America (Lai 20, 38). Kingston's awareness of such implications and her wish to address her work to a general American au-

dience resulted in her adopting the corrective title *China Men* and, consequently, the book's sketchy treatment of the Chinese in the mining industry. To confront the tyrannical power that the misappellation "Chinamen" has accrued, she substitutes "China Men." To gain a wide readership without sacrificing the specific ethnic tone of the book, she supplements the title with a truly ideogrammatic design. The glory of the early Chinese immigrants in California is inscribed in a traditional Chinese seal on both the title page of *China Men* and the first pages of the subsequent six main chapters (Fig. 1).

The untranslated seal is directed on the one hand to those who do not know the language but will feel its symbolic potency and, on the other, to those who understand the language and appreciate its dignifying formal representation. The book title and the seal have in their respective semiotic fashions redefined the Chinese American experience in its appropriate cultural contexts. Like her mother who cross-stitched "Good Morning" in both English and Chinese on the family heirloom patterned with a red phoenix and a red dragon, the daughter-narrator has shown a similar understanding in her stitching of the book—artistic expression and cultural accommodation as an integral process (67). The coining of *China Men* both acknowledges the historical insult of "Chinamen" and reconceives it from a Chinese American perspective, making the term a proud symbol of its ethnic reality. Not unlike the works that set the parameters of the old canon in the titles themselves, the *American Renaissance* and *The American Adam,* to name two, the revision of *China Men* pinpoints at once its claim on the American language and its self-indication in the multiethnic American culture.[3]

2

The myth of America has always been plagued with anxiety about its origin. Whether through the Columbian egg or the *Mayflower* sail, American historical legend is propelled by the desire to rationalize the right of discovery and the right of possession. Be it the American jeremiad or Manifest Destiny, "the American teleology was a entelechy," says Myra Jehlen, "that continues to animate the discovery story" (25). It was against this consensus ideology that more than sixty years ago Williams launched his reinvention of America: *In the American Grain* effectively challenged the authority of the fixed truths by as-

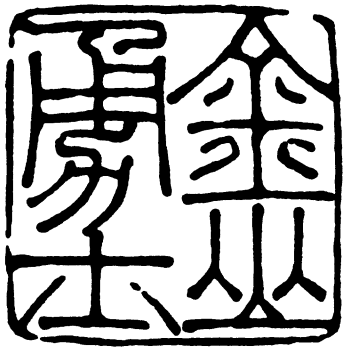

Fig. 1. Traditional Chinese seal used in China Men, *which translates as "Gold Mountain Warriors." (Reprinted by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.)*

serting the Icelandic sagas as part of the American literary tradition, thus attempting to open up the classic canon. It is small wonder that today Kingston seizes upon the same dominant mythology of origin as a point of departure for her insertion of notable historical absences.

Kingston's discovery of the old mythology is marked by her seeming participation in the rhetorical mode that inaugurates the accepted texts. Accurately entitled "On Discovery," whether in its metafictional sense that comments on the devices of discovery or in its literal sense that narrates another adventure story, or both, the opening chapter of *China Men* starts with an unfailing fairy-tale inspiration, "once upon a time," and concludes with a fairly factual statement which reads: "Some scholars say that that country was discovered during the reign of Empress Wu (A.D. 694–705), and some say earlier than that, A.D. 441, and it was in North America" (1–2). If Williams relocates the origin of American history in "Red Eric," father of Leif Ericsson, the first European to land in America, Kingston amazingly dates back Williams's version by five centuries and the official discovery of America which her predecessor sets out to displace by about a millennium, thereby rendering the anniversary of Discovery Day pointless.[4] If Columbus's adventure is celebrated in American history, it is simply because he provided a date in time and a text in space of what the Pilgrims and Puritans would be able to codify as their new Israel. What motivates Williams's work to upset the norm of Anglo-Puritan historiography is the intention to restore other European elements in American culture in order to legitimate the presence of his people.[5] For Kingston, writing itself is none other than a performance of discovery: it is the taking up of the abandoned claims her Chinese forefathers made in the American mining

West and the establishment of their ethnic American identity. The origin of America, one realizes, has its origin in our wishes, dreams, and reveries, and implicit in all versions of narrative history are the hegemonic forces that have little to do with the subject under study but much to do with the choice of the historian.

Unlike the texts of Bradford, Winthrop, and Mather, Kingston's myth of America dispenses with the Judeo-Christian typology and its secularized variations. Kingston instead finds an affiliative order in Chinese mythology. "On Discovery" is actually a creative adaptation of one of the most famous episodes of the eighteenth-century Chinese classic, *Mirror Flower Affair.* Similar to its contemporary Swiftian travel narrative, the Chinese novel relates the global wanderings of a Tang Dynasty (618–907) scholar, Tang Ao, and his daughter-scholar Tang Xiao San's search for him.[6] The allegorical implications Kingston constructs for a knowledgeable audience are obvious: Tang Ao and Xiao San have become the modern incarnation of Kingston and her father, scholars like their literary predecessors. The daughter-narrator's unfolding of multiple stories in *China Men* recaptures the original theme of the quest for father, though this time the father is lost in history. Yet Kingston's appropriation of *Mirror Flower Affair* out of a wide range of other Chinese myths has further significance. Kingston's mythic frame exploits the "entelechy" pattern of American mythology, but we also need to remember the celestial scheme of the original Chinese text which has oddly not been given high visibility. *Mirror Flower Affair* makes clear from the outset that Tang Ao's daughter, Tang Xiao San, is a descended Angel of Flowers, who will finish her trials on earth and ultimately ascend back to Heaven. Tang Ao's travel and Xiao San's pursuit of him are thus both predestined journeys. Tang Ao has eaten some divine grass in the foreign kingdom (presumably North America) and never wishes to leave. Xiao San, however, has had an epiphany that reveals her destiny, and she eventually disappears in the foreign land where her father settles down, as if providence has willed it that the recovery of Tang prosperity is to be fulfilled elsewhere.[7]

In the vignette "On Fathers," Kingston rewrites another incident in *Mirror Flower Affair.* One recalls the original text in which Xiao San has a rendezvous with a woodchopper, a transfiguration of Tang Ao, who refuses to be identified, but directs her to the engraved poem on the wall of a huge rock:

How can one be oblivious of loyalty and piety
Otherwise the worldwide odyssey is futility
Reunion hinges upon remembering
Home is only yonder at Penglai Ding. (359)[8]

Like the previous episode, this one manifests the same imperialistic message of expansion into foreign territories as a predestined mission. Kingston's versions of the myth have obviously muted such original designs, whereas readers privy to the cultural resources that she draws upon are likely to make associations with the prototext. However, in both "On Discovery" and "On Fathers," Kingston's quest for her fathers—the collective Chinese ancestry submerged in American history as opposed to a single family genealogy—is unmistakable. Kingston's stories simultaneously tap the power of the mythical American texts and their Chinese counterparts, offsetting and balancing the two competing orders. That her final product maintains an intertextual distance from the established texts she evokes also suggests that her desire to recall the Chinese of America in history has not precluded refuting the chauvinist tendencies in both Chinese and American mythologies.

Kingston's re-presentation of the episode in "On Discovery" from *Mirror Flower Affair* enfolds yet another of her textual strategies, discoveries made possible through shifts of perspectives. Tang Ao arrives in the Land of Women, supposedly North America, where he undergoes a coercive transvestism. We are told in meticulous detail that Tang Ao has his armor removed, earlobes pierced and filled, his toes bent and feet bound, his beard plucked out and face powdered and painted, until he finally becomes the queen's maid, serving at her court with "swayed hips" and "swiveled shoulders," and winning ironic compliments: "She's pretty, don't you agree?" The myth appears as an extreme instance of Chinese feminist/matriarchal wish fulfillment in antiquity, yet Tang Ao's experience has a meaning that transcends the cautionary moral to male chauvinists. Kingston's deployment of this particular myth at the beginning of her book dramatizes the structural identity of gender oppression and racial discrimination. The male and female inversion in the myth is a power reversal applicable to conditions of race as well; one thinks of Yahoos and Houyhnhnms or Benito Cereno and Babo. By mythically presenting the emasculation of China Men in America, Kingston demonstrates the victimizing of males by an oppressive culture and those victims'

previous participation in the cultural subjugation of women so that the victim-victimizer formation merges to reveal that female identity is as much an arbitrary cultural and historical construction as the identity of "Chinamen." Her switching of alterity displaces the dominating social group into an imaginative identification with the pain and suffering of being the Other. Here, as everywhere else in *China Men,* Kingston has exercised her cross-cultural imagination to its fullest potential: various layers of cultural experience are in need of constant mediation and communication through which their significances are reauthorized.

Seen thus, the myth of "On Discovery" foreshadows the male Chinese American experience as the focus of the work. It becomes a metaphoric disclosure of the fact that anti-Chinese exclusion laws of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries so occluded the Chinese immigrants that, in a sense, they were forced into having their feet bound and were confined to work as laundrymen and cooks, in service jobs traditionally assigned to women. The socially enforced feminization of Chinese American manhood leads to another discovery when one begins to perceive the myth and the book in general as a male story envisioned by a female writer, a spokeswoman who voices her fellow men's valor and anger and redeems them from cultural misconception and historical obscurity. Like Williams's motherly Lincoln, Kingston has freely transgressed realms of experience to provide poetic versions and visions of her America afresh.

3

Discovery, however, cannot be made within the habitual frame of conception. *China Men* often investigates the phenomenon of inert vision that so willfully blocks its horizon of expectation. It is just the refusal to *see* that causes the closure of the American literary canon, and Kingston does not hesitate to problematize and defamiliarize the issue.

"The Adventures of Lo Bun Sun," another of Kingston's interchapters—or shall we restore this twice-told tale to its original name, *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*—may serve as an illustration. Kingston writes through the given canonical text to test the plasticity of a Eurocentric canon. She has quite faithfully represented this cherished Western accidental discovery and its ensuing civilization of the island in synoptic

form with a few adjustments. Among these are the narrative frame which establishes that the story was told by her mother from a book the family had in China; the transliteration of Robinson to "Lo Bun Sun," which can mean "Naked Toiling Mule" on one occasion or a disciple of Buddha on another; and Lo Bun Sun's survival on tofu, rice, and bean sauce (225–34).

Kingston seems to have anticipated three types of reader in response to her rewriting of this perennial Western myth of discovery and colonization: the colonizing reader who assumes the value of the text, the consuming reader who dismisses it as irrelevant, and the conscious reader who manages to learn.[9] For the first type of reader, the additional details of renaming, idiosyncratic food, and the supposed Chinese origin of the story hardly have any impact and are easily fitted into Western cultural patterns so that differences can be ignored. For the second type, this Lo Bun Sun tale is just another exotic oriental feast to be swallowed but not absorbed. Both types are locked in preconceived categories of thinking that obstinately resist dissemination; for them, there is no translatability of experience across cultural or ethnic boundaries, and once the experience is frozen in a convenient label, its value derives from the accumulative meaning customarily denoted. Both attitudes characterize assumptions that safeguard a sacred canon. For these readers, Kingston's invocation of a parallel script seems to be only a calculated miss, yet Kingston invests hope in the conscious reader, the third type and most promising in terms of perspectivism. For these readers, Kingston's back-translation becomes a dislodging reconstitution of a cult figure: her alteration of Robinson's racial identity and her particular geographic reorientation of locale unsettle them as they see their hero reconceived as Chinese. This prompts the recognition for Western readers that Crusoe's justification is one of protocolonizer, imposer of Western norms.

From Robinson to Lo Bun Sun there is a transformative process of discovery, a discovery which is at once an undeniable claim and a forceful exposition. Kingston's creative reproduction of the Robinson myth lays bare the device that rationalizes almost all Western colonization, the workings of language and culture that presuppose the inherent supremacy of European civilization and the barbarous wretchedness of the native. Robinson is sanctified by his civility. His industry, his de-cannibalizing of Friday, and especially his education of the savage in English readily entitle him to the ownership of the land.

Cultural imperialism is naturalized in the linguistic disqualification of the native and the legitimacy of the colonizer.

Cultural imperialism is naturalized in the linguistic disqualification of the native and the legitimacy of the colonizer. Kingston's appropriation of language marks her capacity to share its constructive as well as deconstructive power to reactivate a slice of American history that is Friday's also.

"The Great Father of the Sierra Nevada Mountains" is a chapter that exactly makes up the historical loss the Chinese of America have suffered. Kingston has presented chunks of material to show a shared origin of America that is most likely to be "alien" and "novel" to most readers, who are, however, expected to renew their vision via their own discovery method. The chapter depicts the army of Chinese married bachelors who left their families at home to build the transcontinental railway that ironically helped establish "the empire on the Pacific." Unknowingly, they paved the way for the realization of a manifest destiny that secured the harbors on the West Coast, not only completing the continental expansion of America but also opening the new highway of trade for America to enjoy, in the words of President Polk, "an extensive and profitable commerce with China, and other countries of the East" (Graebner 225).[10] That is, the Chinese ironically became accomplices in the exploitation of their ancient empire.

Probably it is their unconscious participation in the grand scheme that disqualifies them for membership in canonical American history, a history which Kingston now sets out to remember. The story of Ah Goong, Kingston's grandfather, and his fellow workers is a historical representation of irresistible mythic power. "No China Men, no railroad" (138). Their diligence, intelligence, and grace under pressure force white employers to admit their merits, shattering the racist illusion of expansionism, echoed in the narrative voice of Ishmael: "Herein it is the same with the American whale fishery as with . . . the engineering forces employed in the construction of American Canals and Railroads. The same, I say, because in all these cases the native American liberally provides the brains, the rest of the world as generously supplying the muscles" (127). The China Men show convincingly that the mental and physical power that enabled them to build the Great Wall in China also capacitates them to lay the railroad of America (Tsai 15–19; Chen 67–77; Lai 23–25).

In the celebration of her China Men devoting their lives to the westward expansion, Kingston sees that they are not victors but victims. Their talents and prowess are always abused and their masculinity threatened. This dilemma is given symbolic explosion in Ah Goong's ejaculation into the space between

mountains: "I am fucking the world." Since then, whenever he was lowered in a Chinese wicker basket to place dynamite, he could not help feeling "the world's vagina . . . big as the sky, big as a valley . . . and he fucked the world" (130). Though Ah Goong's discourse clearly shares in the discourse of "the lay of the land," he has no political nor economic mastery over the land that he helped to tame. His is perhaps a contracted violence necessarily substituted for regeneration, since regeneration in the traditional Chinese sense means the continuation of family lineage, which Ah Goong's American experience does not afford. Alienation encroaches on him constantly, and at times, "He took out his penis under his blanket or bared it in the woods . . . wondering what it was that it was for, what a man was for, what he had to have a penis for" (142). The Chinese workers whose families are not given entry to the US and who themselves are politically intimidated by their oppressors' power to fire and deport are virtually castrated: "Ah Goong does not appear in railroad photographs" that commemorate the formal junction of the Central Pacific and the Union Pacific, so that the Chinese contribution to a landmark achievement in American history is omitted (143).[11]

The completion of the transcontinental railway is accompanied by Driving Out: the linking of the continent fails to make the hoped-for connection between the Chinese and the American.[12] Walt Whitman's democratic and pluralistic America was yet an ideal to be fought for, but his prophecy remains true. "The immigrant," our poet of En Masse anticipated, "like the writer, comes up against the canons, and has to last them out" (qtd. in Traubel 135). The sons and daughters of the immigrant have indeed outlasted the culturally canonical discriminations of the past and are working their way toward reshaping the literary canon.

Intuitively grasping Whitman's foresight, Kingston centers her discovery of the canon in the middle of her book: the interchapter entitled "The Laws" records the American legislation excluding Chinese immigrants since 1868. Kingston's discovery is now to be understood in a strict legal context, the compulsory disclosure of evidence essential to maintain the case. As the writer can no longer stomach "the mainstream culture['s]" "ignorance" of Chinese American history, so "right in the middle of the stories—plunk," there is a section on laws excluding Chinese, a section which estranges or rather excludes the reader from the customary Eurocentric view of American history (Pfaff 25). Kingston reconstructs a historical reality simply by introducing conveniently forgotten legal documents into

her modern text. The beginning of the chapter, then, is a citation:

> The United States of America and the Emperor of China cordially recognize the inherent and inalienable right of man to change his home and allegiance, and also the mutual advantage of the free migration and emigration of their citizens and subjects respectively from one country to the other for purposes of curiosity, of trade, or as permanent residents. ARTICLE V OF THE BURLINGAME TREATY, SIGNED IN WASHINGTON, D.C., JULY 1868, AND IN PEKING, NOVEMBER 23, 1869. (150)

The treaty, however, was immediately amended to specify that only "free whites" and "African aliens" were eligible for naturalization, an act entitling them to "the same rights" as native-born Americans (150). The ostentatious display of the "inherent and inalienable right of man" and the "free[dom of] migration and emigration" became for China Men, who are neither white nor black, an instant American nightmare. Successive legal texts listed in the brief chapter demonstrate a persistent effort to "suspend" and "supplement," "refine" and "modify," "extend" and "decree" laws that authorize in words and encode in language discriminations against the Chinese immigrant. Not only are they words, linguistic records of a historical past, but also they are acts of language and power to brutalize a voiceless minority. Kingston's assemblage of the legalistic texts at once reveals the oppressive power that they used to carry and the power of the contemporary writer who can transform them into a counter-language. Moreover, Kingston's insistent chronology of these texts presents an alternative periodization of America's rise as an imperial power wherein the history is not conceived as a glorious expansionist epic but as a systematic exploitation of the ethnic minority whose contribution has been appropriated but legal status rejected. To restore historical memory from the Chinese Americans' point of view, Kingston brings back the effaced items of the past so that the reader may be equipped to reevaluate their traditionally constituted reality.

Repealed in 1943, these laws are still keenly felt. The language that once excluded the Chinese American people is liable to retain its marginalizing potential. One telling example comes from the girl-narrator's remark on the school dog tags: "So our dog tags had *O* for religion and *O* for race because neither black nor white. Mine also had *O* for blood type. Some kids said *O* was for 'Oriental,' but I knew it was for 'Other' because the

Filipinos, the Gypsies, and the Hawaiian boy were *O*'s" (276). Trivial as it may seem, the linguistic sign betrays an infiltration into the youthful consciousness of a demarcation between the preferable and dismissible racial and social groups. There are the central majority "us" and there are the peripheral minority "those." By setting one against the other, the mainstream culture achieves what Edward Said terms "positional superiority," a hegemony enjoyed by the dominant cultural community over the artificial inferiority of the ethnic Other (7). Both puzzled and alienated, the narrator addresses her father, "I want to be able to rely on you, who inked each piece of our own laundry with the word *Center,* to find out how we landed in a country where we are eccentric people" (9). This urge to find out has resulted in Kingston's ratification of the "outsider" who is given normality and centrality in the battle of words.

4

Gaining the center for a positional "other" is a process of discovery, which involves the bringing into light of what has been previously hidden or unknown about Chinese Americans as well as an intense examination of traditional perspectives on them. *China Men* both shares in the process of canon reformation in its critical accommodation of the various competing voices in historical contexts, and reflects Kingston's preference, expressed in *Hawai'i One Summer,* to "write from opposing points of view at once—rebel's and householder's, student's and teacher's, mother's and child's" (1). Throughout, Kingston's narrative mode includes viewpoints both stereotypical and oppositional. The reader is given different angles to "experience the way that [a character] sees the world," while the validity of the stories is neither confirmed nor refuted but kept in dialogical tension (Pfaff 26).

Kingston gives us two alternative versions of her father's entry into the US. One story begins with, "I think this is the journey you don't tell me," and she imagines, in ways personifying a prevalent stereotype, that her father, an "illegal" stowaway, was smuggled into New York City. The other story commences with, "Of course, my father could not have come that way. He came a legal way . . ." and she proceeds with an account—authentically formulaic it may seem—of how the "legal" father went through government interrogation and proved himself a legitimate immigrant into San Francisco (45–57). Both versions start with similar negative constructions;

neither given the assurance of truth nor denied that possibility, the reader is left ample space to make his or her own discovery. By the same token, Kingston provides in her book a gallery of China Men whose images vary with time and locality. Not only do we have the great-grandfather of the Hawaii sandalwood mountains shout into the earth hole "Hello down there in China!" but also the brotherly brother in Vietnam, a pacifist who ends up a remedial English teacher on board an aircraft carrier (115, 289–90). There are "Alaska China Men" who are set adrift, as alienated and as lonely as the Chinaman in *Cannery Row,* and there is China Joe who provides services to miners who drive his countrymen back home (159–61). Finally comes the one-hundred-year-old China Man who landed on Hawaii in 1885 and in 1969 was giving reporters a version of Chauncy Gardner in *Being There*: "In the end," said Tu Fu, "I will carry a hoe" (306–07). Here, one notes, Kingston's characters are featured in not only historical but also spatial variety. Like the historiography she offers in her work, the physical traces of China Men in various parts of America suggest geography that maps in the footprints of the Chinese American as concretely and distinctly as the railway.

The last two pages of *China Men* are "On Listening," another vignette that resonates with the opening, "On Discovery." These pages are a cumulative discovery culminating in the unraveling of Kingston's narrative plot; her story is done but its value lies in those who listen. Kingston describes a party orchestrated with disparate voices in which the motif of the myth of discovery recurs to give a sense of a narrative spiral. A Filipino scholar claims that the Chinese looked for the Gold Mountain in the Philippines, where they found gold so abundant that they donated much to "the Filipino king," "the Queen of Spain," and "the Emperor of China." His story is interrupted by a young Chinese American who affirms that a Chinese monk did indeed go to Mexico with Cortez. He is then disputed by someone else who says, "The way I heard it was that some cowboys saw mandarins floating over California in a hot-air balloon, which came all the way from China." Kingston, the narrative "'I" here, does not clearly "hear everything" said, and upon her request, the Filipino scholar promises "to write it down" for her. At this point, Kingston punctures her narrative by addressing both the audience at the party and at large with the concluding note: "Good. Now I could watch the young men who listen" (308–09).

This self-reflexive chapter highlights two prevailing con-

cerns of Kingston's: that histories are no more than motivated stories and that the mode of narration says as much as the narrative itself. The representation of history is always wrought under processes of selective retention and vision, for discovery is never made in a neutral ideological zone. Kingston likes differences of "seeing" and "remember[ing]" not only because they give her different stories for one event, but also because they testify to the workings of the historical process (Islas 14). Her focus on listening to multiple stories of discovery or making discoveries by listening to various versions of history echoes a distinctive Whitmanesque note when the bard of democracy admonishes his audience:

> You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look
> through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books,
> You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,
> You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self. (26)

The emphasis on listening, moreover, marks Kingston's artistic movement from an earlier quest for an individual articulation—characterized by *The Woman Warrior*'s progress from silence to song—to the present choral representation of voices in *China Men.* She composes a polyphony to an audience in whom she invests her hope of revisioning a historical past and envisioning a prospective future. In this respect, *China Men* carries almost the same rhetorical appeal as is illuminated in the last line of *Invisible Man,* "Who knows but that on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (439).

Kingston's fascination with the changing nature of history in the present circumstances of the listener/perceiver results in her distinctive narrative mode, known as "talk story." As a method of telling, talk story refers to the original Chinese oral tradition that a story is first delivered to a community and then becomes "*Hua Ben*" or "story roots" of later written versions (Hsu 47–48). For Kingston, talk story has "the impact of command, of directly influencing action. . . . It changes according to the needs of the listener, according to the needs of the day, the interest of the time" (Islas 18). Indeed, her representative power to eschew closure and render fluidity in interacting voices enables her text to achieve a kind of talk story orality that

vitalizes the writing, showing that the demands of the present inevitably inform our recovering and relating of a historical past.

In talk story, Kingston has transplanted and transformed an old literary form: traditional Chinese myths localized in the particular Cantonese community have experienced evolution upon the soil of America. Similar to Ellison's constructive use of African folklore, Kingston renders her Chinese American talk story in the ebb and flow of change. Change results both from transmission and as a direct and positive response to demands of cultures—the collision and negotiation of mainstream American cultural motifs with the Chinese American subcultural motifs which occasion Kingston's works. Moreover, change epitomizes American culture more than any other in the world, because an economic built-in obsolescence that disposes of anything old has left an indelible mark on the literary production of the country: the constant call to make it new paves the way for a rejuvenation of the American canon that successive generations of literary revolutionaries embrace. Kingston's talk story, without exception, appropriates this internal structure of American renaissances: "I am in the tradition of American writers who consciously set out to create the literature of a new culture. Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, Gertrude Stein, the Beats all developed ears for dialect, street language, and experimented with how to make written language sound like spoken language. The content of that language is the ever-changing mythology. I am writing American mythology in American language" (Letter). Kingston's talk story has naturally merged into a literary antinomian impulse that emerges whenever the established literary canon has turned stiff and sterile. Twain, Whitman, and Stein, the models she erects and emulates, all fought for a new literary canon by advocating a return to the root of the common, the authentic American language. Now in Kingston's talk story, we hear another rhythm of the American speech, another accent of the American mythology, another note of American democracy sounded high like "an icicle in the desert" (*The Woman Warrior* 243).

The talk story of *China Men* proposes an approach to reforming the American literary canon. Kingston's *China Men* talks a male story from a female point of view, a narrative strategy suggesting at once a female participation in male stories and an explicit measure to de-genderize the male-centered history. The talk stories in *China Men,* with their centrifugal versions and variations, counteract the dominant centripetal mode of traditional historiography, either in jeremiad pattern or in

such secular expressions as *Robinson Crusoe.* History in those narratives is foreshadowed by a providential design, a single human purpose, or a combination of both. *China Men* starts out to subvert this genre of monolithic history through its discovery of a collective mode; its stories are episodic and pluralistic in the pure sense of the words. History, as this talk story mode implies, is a discovery of many equal stories, not a solo appearance but a choral performance.

The discovery of talk story has led to the participation of the Chinese American people in a broadened canon, an enterprise for which Kingston is undoubtedly a spokesperson: "When I write about America," she says, "I feel that I've claimed it. It's a way of being a minority that's not left out" (Reading). What vanished from the public historical consciousness has now been reinstated by the act of relating the community stories; Kingston's literary representation causes a recognition of an ethnic American existence. She has created a narrative as well as an ideological discovery procedure that asserts cultural independence as well as interdependence in the American grain. She freely co-opts categories of American cultures and adapts them to fit her own. *China Men* not only cashes in on the established norms of canonical American literature and mythology but also recovers Chinese Americans in their own idiom. Its cross-cultural translation has made the work both accessible and compelling to a general American audience.[13]

Notes

I wish to thank Anthony C. Hilfer for his incisive reading of an early version of this essay, and Warwick Wadlington for his comments.

1. Influential critics like Bercovitch, Gates, and Lauter, among others too many to list, focus more on other divergent shaping factors of the canon than "the author." One work I find that does give due consideration of the issue is von Hallberg's anthology *Canons,* in the preface of which the editor argues against the overestimation of critics' "importance and autonomy in the process of canon-formation" and for an examination of "the ways in which artists, in choosing their models, set the terms for disputes among academic canonizers" (2). Smith contends in the same volume, "the value of a work—that is, its effectiveness in performing desired/able functions for some set of subjects—is not independent of authorial design, labor and skill" (31).

2. It is Nadel's insightful thesis that Ellison situates *Invisible Man* in regard to the American literary tradition, comments on that tradition, and in doing so, alters it. Kutzinski convincingly argues that Williams rejects the tra-

ditional American literary canon and formulates a countertradition of new-world writing.

3. Naming has always been Kingston's chief concern. She has remarked in an *American Heritage* article, "In the early days of Chinese American history, men called themselves 'Chinamen' . . . the term distinguished them from the 'Chinese' who remained citizens of China, and showed they were not recognized as Americans. Later, of course, it became an insult. Young Chinese Americans today are reclaiming the word because of its political and historical precision, and are demanding that it be said with dignity and not for name-calling" (37). About a related term, "Chinese American," Kingston also has an interpretation of her own, which I follow: "I have been thinking that we ought to leave out the hyphen in 'Chinese-American,' because the hyphen gives the word on either side equal weight, as if linking two nouns. It looks as if a Chinese-American has double citizenship, which is impossible in today's world. Without the hyphen, 'Chinese' is an adjective and 'American' a noun; a Chinese American is a type of American" ("Cultural Mis-readings" 60). Another Chinese American, author Frank Chin, confronts in his play *The Chickencoop Chinaman* the racial slur of "Chinamen" by parodic acceptance of the term only to undermine the stereotype.

4. Historians Chen (5–6) and Tsai (1) give similar accounts of the Chinese discovery of America but discount their reliability.

5. Son of an English father and a Puerto Rican mother of Basque and Jewish origins, Williams was raised in a bilingual household of English and Spanish. This background explains his interest in the restoration of Latin-American culture in American history.

6. The early *Hawaii Review* version gives references both to Jonathan Swift and his contemporary, Li Ruzhen, the Chinese author.

7. Chinese people have always regarded the Tang Dynasty as a period of high technological development and social harmony. The name "China Town" in Chinese is literally "Tang People's Street" (*China Men* 7).

8. My translation. "Penglai" in Chinese traditional mythology refers either to Japan or some South China Sea islands. Kingston obviously conflates the myths here to lend new meanings.

9. Three critics of *China Men* seem to approximate the types of reader that I hypothesize. Grundy notices an analogy between Robinson and the China Men in that both "escape from rigid families, dream of wealth," and are "desultorily heroic, persistently restless, capable both of unpredictable action and of the most businesslike attention to routine, discontented with solitude and yet by nature solitary" (123). She neglects the fact that China Men overall have a strong sense of family, and their solitude in the US is more a result of social alienation than personal choice. Neubauer sees that "The Chinese legend of Lo Bun Sun bears a strong resemblance to the adventures of Robinson Crusoe," but she fails to regard it as an adaptation of the original story (28). Sledge views it as one of the "ironic analogues of western tales" (7).

10. For a discussion of the relationship between the construction of the transcontinental railway and the westward expansion, see Graebner 94–99, 217–28; Takaki 229–31.

11. One account of the glaring absence of the Chinese workers in the ceremony picture vividly illustrates their oppressed social condition. When four Chinese workers carried the last rail, someone in the crowd shouted to the photographer, "Shoot!" Constant threats to their existence so exercised their survival mechanism that the Chinese workers fled the moment they heard the word, forgetting its other meaning (Chen 73). Others record the company's prohibition of Chinese workers in the ceremony (Tsai 18). It is interesting to observe that while Thoreau lamented the miserable condition of the "Yankee" and "Irish" "sleepers" he failed to take into account the worse-off Chinese railroad workers (209). Against the backdrop of such historical erasure comes the contemporary endeavor to recover the indelible trace—the railway has emerged as the symbolic reaffirmation of Chinese American heritage. Kingston's rendition of it is complemented by other literary attempts: Frank Chin's drama, *The Chickencoop Chinaman,* closes with an evocation of the train whistle; in Shawn Hsu Wong's novel *Homebase,* the journey along the railroad becomes the narrator's quest for the lost roots, while the Tony-winning playwright David Henry Hwang interweaves, in his *The Dance and the Railroad,* the theme of building the railroad with the transplantation of Chinese traditional folk art onto American soil.

12. As "a small, voteless minority," the Chinese have borne the brunt of hostility initially directed at the railroad monopoly, the earliest giant corporations in history, and become the "easily identifiable scapegoats" (Lai 39). Periodical literature of the time proliferated the Sinophobic sentiment with cartoons and familiar essays. The stereotypical image of Chinese was either one of a pigtailed, multiple-handed, spiderlike creature grabbing jobs that belonged to people of non-Chinese origin or one of a bloodsucking vampire that gave Uncle Sam headaches (Lai 38; Takaki 218–19). The irony of Bret Harte's "Plain Language From Truthful James" was entirely missed among a public who corroborated their unfavorable views of the Chinese and chose to interpret it in their own favor. Moaning, "We are ruined by Chinese cheap labor" (Harte 88), people hawked "The Heathen Chinee" (by far the poem's most popular title) in streets and cited it in Congress as a case against the Chinese (Kim 14–15; Takaki 222–25). Furious about the inhumane public opinion about and legal restriction on them, our poet says:

> America must welcome all—Chinese, Irish, German, pauper or not, criminal or not—all, all, without exceptions. . . . America is not for special types, for the castes, but for the great mass of people—the vast, surging, hopeful, army of workers. Dare we deny them a home—close the doors in their face—take possession of all and fence it in and then sit down satisfied with our system—convinced that we have solved the problem? I for my part refuse to connect America with such a failure—such a tragedy, for tragedy it would be. (qtd. in Traubel 134–35)

13. About her audience Kingston says, "I am really a megalomaniac because I write for everybody living today and people in the future; that's my audience, for generations" (Islas 16). Popular as she has become, there are

misconceptions of her work. While some Anglo-American critics take her talk stories to be in the vein of Chinese classic tradition, other Chinese American critics assail her for her alteration of Chinese legends, comparing her work to "fortune cookies," and worst of all charging implicitly that she is in collusion with the white press (Islas 14–16; Tsai 143; Gordon 24–25). Whereas the former fail to detect the American tone of the book, the latter hear only the American note. Both are imprisoned in perceptual frames that reinforce the fetishistic apprehension of the exotic and the paranoic revulsion from the dominant culture. Kingston's discovery procedures, I have exhibited, masterfully avoid the simplifications such critics would reduce her to. For a sampling of numerous journal articles on Kingston and a detailed description of her institutional recognitions, see David Leiwei Li.

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