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Yan Geling's *Fusang*[1]—The "Who" and "Where" of "Fifth-Generation Immigrant" Writing

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In an interview with Amy Tan for an event organized by the PEN American Center in New York City in 2004, Yan Geling, whose author website describes her as "one of the most acclaimed contemporary novelists and screenwriters writing in the Chinese language today and a well-established writer in English,"[2] insisted on the role of the writer as a collector of stories. Going so far as to view herself as "the only one who remembers things"—as the Chinese are, in her vision, "a very forgetful people"— Yan expressed her disappointment with both Chinese and American national spaces and communities and pointed out writerly negotiations of complex social, political and cultural belongings and affiliations (Tan).

In truth, in this author's case, one would be hard pressed to ascribe clearly defined designations or classifications. Born in Shanghai and already established as a writer in China before going to Columbia College Chicago to prepare a Master's in fiction writing, she belongs to this category of intellectuals who chose to stay in the USA after the 1989 events in China. She has mainly written in Chinese and strong recognition of her early writing came especially from Taiwan, where over the years she received numerous prestigious awards and prizes[3]. Starting in the 2000s, Yan has also been acknowledged in Mainland China both as a writer and as a screenwriter. Member of both the *Writers' Association* of the People's Republic of China and of the *Writers' Guild of America*, the author collaborated as scriptwriter or co-scriptwriter to the adaptation of her books into internationally successful movies, such as *Coming Home* (2014), based on her short novel *The Criminal Lu Yanshi* (2011), directed by Zhang Yimou and starring Chen Daoming and Gong Li or *The Flowers of War* (2012), adapted from her novel *The Thirteen Women of Nanjing*[4] (2011), directed by Zhang Yimou again, featuring actors Christian Bale and Ni Ni.

[1] *Fusang* is the original Chinese title, whereas the English edition, translated by Cathy Silber, bears the title *The Lost Daughter of Happiness*.

[2] http://lawrenceawalker.wix.com/yangeling#!bio/c1ktj

[3] This began as early as 1991 with a first prize from *Central Daily News* for her novella "Siao Yu." She subsequently received numerous other distinctions in Taiwan, awarded by the *United Daily News*, the *Taiwan Academy of Motion Pictures* or within the framework of the *National Students and Scholars Literary Contest*.

[4] The English edition bears the same title as the movie, i.e. *The Flowers of War*.

Challenging categories and redrawing borders

Complicating both Sinocentric and Americanocentric narratives of victimization as well as of triumphalism, *Fusang*, the work under scrutiny here, was written in Chinese (published in 1996) and was considered, even before its first English translation (2001), as challenging the canon of American literature, especially if viewed from a LOWINUS (Languages of What Is Now the United States) perspective. The LOWINUS project aims at a transnational expansion of the field of American Studies by advocating a multilingual approach to American literature. Promoted by Werner Sollors and Marc Shell, it led to the foundation of the Longfellow Institute at Harvard University[5], in 1994 and several works have been published under its aegis, most notably the well-known collection of critical articles *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and the Languages of American Literature* (1998) and *The Multilingual Anthology of American Literature* (2000)[6]. In this view, works created in the mother tongues of Asian immigrant authors should also be regarded not only as part of Asian American literature, but also as part of American literature proper. And if we pursue a position that has not left anyone indifferent, namely Bharati Muckerjee's statement, expressed in a study where she delineates the "Literature of New Arrival" and includes Yan's name (4), the academy still has to develop "the grid and the grammar to explore [...] works that are not quite 'American' in a canonical sense" (16).

This particular challenge has been highly relevant in the field of Asian American Studies, where the very designation is seen as marked by a "constant instability," "open to continued critical negotiation" (Hong Sohn et al. 2), not simply an "ontological category [but] a type of hermeneutic as well as an epistemology—a way of interpreting and a way of making knowledge" (Ho 208). If we believe, with Susan Koshy, that "unlike African American, Native American or Chicano literature, Asian American literature inhabits the highly unstable temporality of the 'about-to-be,' its meanings continuously reinvented after the arrival of new groups of immigrants and the enactment of legislative changes [...]" (315),

[5] The Longfellow Institute is "[...] designed to support the study of non-English writings in what is now the United States and to reexamine the English-language tradition in the context of American multilingualism. Named after Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the polyglot nineteenth-century poet who, in his translations and academic work, helped to develop literary study across linguistic boundaries, the Institute has set itself the task to identify, and to bring back as the subject of study, the multitudes of culturally fascinating, historically important, or aesthetically outstanding American texts that were written in many languages, ranging, for example, from works in indigenous Amerindian languages, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, French, Dutch, German, Norwegian, Swedish, Russian, Polish, Yiddish, Hungarian, Chinese, and Japanese, to Arabic and French texts by African Americans". For more on its founding beliefs and mission, see http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~lowinus/.

[6] For an exhaustive list, see the above mentioned website of the Institute. We can nevertheless mention here the monograph *Chinese American Literature since the 1850s* by Xiao-huang Yin (University of Illinois Press, 2000), Orm Øverland's study – *The Western Home: A Literary History of Norwegian America* (University of Illinois Press, 1997) or Steven G. Kellman's – *The Translingual Imagination* (University of Nebraska Press, 2000).

then the term itself eschews any conceptualization based on an unique valence and it finds its meanings by challenging categories and redrawing borders, especially when having to attune to the realities of a globalized world. Yet, the particularity of "Asian American studies" resides in the fact that, as a field of study under the Ethnic Studies umbrella, it has been shaped, from its early days, by an activist commitment to "local" and "American national." In an era when, in Elaine H. Kim's eloquent phrasing, "the lines between Asian and Asian American [...] are increasingly being blurred" (xiii), the importance of establishing the presence of this ethnic minority in the US national and cultural contemporary context is still reiterated by those who question the "denationalization" of the field[7]. One direct consequence of this is the fact that the body of works commanding "mainstream" status has largely been that composed in English. The few Chinese-language texts to have been systematically included in the Asian American canon in translation—such as *Island* (Lai et al. 1980) and *Songs of Gold Mountain* (Hom 1987)—have been so as a direct result of this project of "cultural reclamation" and as expressions of personal historical experiences.

As a matter of fact, Yan Geling's novel has been discussed as "Chinese American literature" by a number of influential critics such as Te-hsing Shan (1998) and Ning Wang (2012). Generally, this has been done under different overlapping categorizations such as "immigrant Chinese American," "global Chinese diasporic" or "Chinese overseas" writing. These labelings are fraught with ambiguities, and gesture to political, cultural and institutional assumptions, as evinced by the controversy arising at the international conference on the "literatures of Chinese Diaspora" organized in 2002 by the Asian American Studies Program of the University of California, Berkeley[8]. The two keynote speakers, Sau-ling Wong (Hong-Kong born and raised Asian American critic from the host university) and Maurice Wong Chuck (San Francisco-based Chinese-American writer of Chinese expression) used and defended different names and visions of the "literatures of Chinese diaspora"[9]. As noted by a Canadian scholar attending the event, while the former focused on "Chinese-American immigrant literature" in order to criticize "stories of Chinese triumphalism that idealize the purity of 'the Chinese spirit' in Chinese-language Chinese

[7] I refer here to Sau-ling Wong's now canonical intervention "Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads," initially published in 1995 in *Amerasia Journal*. An updated enlarged version, taking different divergent views into account was included in *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity and Literature* (2000).

[8] The complete title of the conference is "Kaihua Jieguo zai Haiwai: An International Conference on the Literatures of Chinese Diaspora."

[9] As Sau-ling Wong commented elsewhere, the formulation of the conference title reveals strong ambivalences and contradictions on the subject of the Chinese diaspora: while the English wording "Literatures of the Chinese Diaspora" is "only descriptive," the Chinese one "Kaihua Jieguo zai Haiwai" (flowering and fruiting overseas) "betrays sinocentrism" (in Zhao).

immigrant writing in the US," the latter delivered a paper that "appealed directly to 'the Chinese spirit' as a unifying force in the diaspora" (Beauregard 131). As further noted by a Nanjing University professor of English, "Maurice Wong Chuck, who is a 'Chinese-American immigrant' writer in Wong's term, straightforwardly calls this literature 'Chinese literature overseas'" and refutes Sau-ling Wong's understanding of this category (Zhao).

These considerations pertain to what Tseen Khoo calls "a work's multivalenced existence" and refer not only to the cultural and national moment from which the text originated, but also to a "transnational literary economy" that points to "engagements with, and audiences in [different] sociocultural contexts" (2-3). The fact that Chinese readers have seen Yan Geling's writings as "Overseas Chinese" both adds a new significant location to their "existence" and bespeaks the difficulty of containing it: while the "Overseas Chinese" label conveys the same idea of Chinese nationalist appropriation and recuperation as those reverberating in Chuck's arguments, it is in reality a subversive one. Indeed, it is a category challenging the canon of Chinese modern literature—which is, as Te-hsing Shan reminds us, "mostly characterized by the works of the male intelligentsia of the Han people," excluding "other ethnic and linguistic groups and classes," as well as "female writers" (123)—and has only recently acquired visibility[10].

Engaging with cultural and political significations

Given all the above-limned elements and aspects delineating the cultural locations of Yan Geling's work, and keeping in mind David Perkins's analysis of literary taxonomies, whereby "a classification is also an orientation, an act of criticism" (62), each designation conjuring a horizon of expectation of contexts and intertexts, this paper aims at exploring how *Fusang* provides a thought-provoking induction into the problematics of Asian/(Asian) American configurations and crossings. This is done by the interweaving of the destinies and voices of two Chinese women, living in the late 20th century and 19th century respectively. The contemporary woman is an unnamed immigrant writer who endeavors to unveil and narrate the untold story of Fusang, a well-known Chinese prostitute abducted from south China and brought to San Francisco. The narrator's personal story, into which glimpses are afforded along the way, conveys a fifth-generation lack of faith, despondency and loss of direction in the urban landscape of contemporary multiethnic America. Chronicled as part of a broader tapestry marked by escalating acts of violence between the Chinese and the Caucasian population, Fusang's existence is mainly represented as determined by her relations with

[10] This is corroborated as late as 2005 by the remarks of the founding editors of the *Journal of Chinese Overseas* (cf. for details Ng and Tan).

two men: her pimp, the gangster Da Yong, and Chris, a middle-class Caucasian American obsessed with her since adolescence.

Since the protagonists' journeys originate in China and continue on to the United States, even by the most mechanical criterion of "physical setting" the novel could be understood as a text spanning the Chinese and the Chinese American, the Asian and the Asian American. Yet, here, it is Chinatown itself that appears as a space encapsulating overlapping histories and temporalities, synchronic and diachronic narratives of history. *Fusang* offers intriguing (counter) versions to existing representations of Chinatown by choosing to evoke the formative period of the Chinese settlement in the United States through the figure of the prostitute, a figure generally and until very recently at worst elided, at best distorted even in historical and sociological studies[11]. In this respect, Yan's account goes beyond a mere attempt at realistically depicting and documenting—with a possible view to correcting existing knowledge—this aspect of female sojourning. Most significantly, the focus on Chinatown, not only as an ethnic but also as a gendered space, implies in this case a critical engagement with the issues of heritage and culture, as well as a negotiation of different discourses on them, an undertaking echoing with intertextual resonances. Concerning this last aspect, my very decision to keep the original Chinese title is justified by an important paratextual allusion that is lost when adopting the English version, i.e. *The Lost Daughter of Happiness*. It points to "the kingdom of Fusang," an account recorded in ancient Chinese chronicles depicting a territory east of China where "several Buddhist missionaries" landed in the 6th century A.D. (Steiner 3), a territory believed by Chinese as well as Western historians to be either the Pacific coast of North America or an island off Japan[12]. I interpret this element as gesturing not only to the moving frontiers between history and myth, problematizing the establishment of a linear, accurate version of history, but also, if we keep in mind that Fusang is the name of the main female character, to an allegory of the founding days of Chinese America which is under scrutiny here.

If for immigrant authors figuring out "where" they are sometimes comes prior to an understanding of "who" they are, one would imagine that the spatial consciousness of a contemporary writer goes "beyond Chinatown." Yet, this would mean ignoring the enduring influential symbolism of this urban space in the Asian American imagination, whose legacies are still buried under the weight of contradictory representations. Chinatown remains a contested territory, heavily laden with cultural and political significations. In Sau-ling

[11] On this, see Benson Tong's monograph *Unsubmissive Women: Chinese Prostitutes in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco* (1994).

[12] See Leland, C.G. *Fusang: or, The Discovery of America by Chinese Buddhist Priests in the Fifth Century*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1973 (1875) or *Stan Steiner,* Fusang: *The Chinese who Built America* (1979).

Wong's apt formulation, "the same reality found within its bounds may be coded in vastly divergent ways depending on who is looking and speaking" ("Ethnic Subject" 252).

By means of a short digression, it should be pointed out that when attempting to limn a tradition of Chinatown literary representations, one can note that the first account penned by an American-born Chinese appeared as late as 1943—Pardee Lowe's *Father and Glorious Descendant*, followed two years later by Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, both inaugurating a tradition of "Chinatown guide tours," upholding many of the popular stereotypes of that period feeding in the "model minority" label; they were to be followed by the "goodwill ambassadors," China-born aristocratic scholars like Lin Yutang (*Chinatown Family*, 1948) and Chin Yang Lee (*Flower Drum Song*, 1957), who had never lived in this area nevertheless felt obliged to present a sympathetic portrait of its inhabitants.

These portrayals are in a way justified if we take into account the fact that these writers had to insert themselves into—and subvert—a tradition of Anglo-American depictions. As researchers like Elaine Kim (1982) and Robert G. Lee (1999) have documented, different types of earlier accounts, ranging from popular California gold-rush songs, newspaper or magazine reports, or more sophisticated representations claiming a certain literariness, delineate this ethnic enclave as encapsulating the alien within the modern American society. "John Chinaman" embodies the "yellow peril"—coolie with no civic or working-class consciousness, morally and biologically degraded, effeminate and incapable of respectable domesticity: "his language, food, dress and labor, his very body polluted the Eden that California represented" (Lee 50); the female immigrant comes through as either "victimized, passive, and silent" (21), a victim of "male exploitation" (Tong xvii) or otherwise as "saturated with disease" and "infusing a poison into the Anglo-Saxon blood —to quote the editor of a 19th century local Californian advice journal included in Nayan Shah's study *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (107). Her voicelessness, invisibility or at best fragmentedness have actually transformed her into a projection screen onto which different types of discourses, overdetermined by parameters linked to nationality, race, sex, and class collude in defining her.

Yan takes up this neglected subject of female sojourning and from the *incipit* of her novel puts forward the interconnected issues of fictionality and metafictionality linked to the textualisation of these types of historical realities. Its multi-layered opening scene deserves careful perusal, as it anticipates and foregrounds topics crucial to the unfolding narrative and its interpretation:

THIS WHO YOU ARE.

> The one dressed in red, slowly rising from a creaking bamboo bed, is you. The embroidery on your satin- padded jacket must weigh ten catties. […].

> Let me raise your chin a bit here and bring your lips into the dim light. That's it, just right. Now I can see your whole face clearly. Don't worry - others will just find exotic the face you consider too square. [...].
>
> Now turn around, just like all those times on the auction block. You're used to the auction; that's where pretty whores like you come to know their worth. I found pictures of those auctions in some books about Chinatown - dozens of female bodies, totally naked, their beauty in sharp relief against the surrounding gloom. [...].
>
> Don't be so eager to show off your feet. I know they're less than four inches long: two mummified magnolia buds. I'll let you show them later. After all, you're not like that woman who lived at 129 Clay Street from 1890 to 1940 and made her living putting her four-inch golden lotuses on display. Several thousand tourists a day would shuffle reverently past her door looking at the way her dead toes had been broken clean under and now curled into the soles of her feet. [...]. In the deformity and decay of those feet they could read the Orient.
>
> I know who you were: a twenty-year-old prostitute, one of a succession of three thousand prostitutes from China.
>
> On a summer day in the late 1860s, there's a rather large girl standing in a barred window on a narrow lane in San Francisco's Chinatown, and that's you. [...].
>
> You're wondering why I singled you out. You don't know that foreign historians wrote about you. [...]. These writers are totally serious when they say things like: "When the famous, or perhaps we should say infamous, Chinese prostitute Fusang appeared in all her finery, gentlemen were so stirred they could not help but doff their hats to her." And: "The consensus on this Chinese prostitute, considered such an anomaly, confirmed that she was essentially the same as her Western counterparts and showed no anatomical abnormalities."
>
> You know I too am auctioning you. (1-4)

This beginning points to a simultaneously real, imaginary and symbolic location: San Francisco's Chinatown—North America's oldest and biggest one, during the gold rush years—"late 1860s" (3)—a setting not yet bearing the marks of the enactment of the most important legal barriers directed at Chinese immigrants. Part of the interpretative background called forth by the novel is indeed the specific apparatus of racialization and gendering corresponding to the material conditions of the historical setting. These restrictive measures took place most effectively, beginning with the 1875 Page Law, that forbade the importation of women "suspected of coming for 'immoral' or other 'lewd' purposes" (Peffer 8). The popular and legal rhetoric and practices against the Chinese immigration culminated in the Exclusion Act of 1882.

It is a racially marked topography, the process of becoming "Orientalized," the lived experience of being inscribed as an exotic "Oriental" emerging here as more than abstractions, hinting at a history of restrictive immigration and settlement laws, discrimination, violence, imprisonment, as well as social, political and cultural subordination. Chinatown serves as a figure of the unassimilable and the alien, ultimately reduced to its foreignness. Its legibility, gesturing thus to a specific *hic et nunc* and resonating with historical and cultural allusions is filtered, from the onset, through East/West, same/other, familiar/unfamiliar, ethnic/American dichotomies, its "spectacularity" residing in its gendered facet. This urban space appears indeed as a site where the ethnic woman's body and experience are not only commodified and subject to containments emanating, visibly, from both traditional patriarchal Chinese structures and mainstream Western ones, but also displayed. Showcased as fascinatingly exotic, reduced to loci of difference—her face and especially her feet—, the discourses and practices manufacturing and magnifying these real—and supposed—physical particularities, are shown as encompassing what is exposed as well as what is concealed ("no anatomical abnormalities"), the rhetoric of both the seen and the unseen fraught with Orientalizing, verging on racist, assumptions.

These passages also convey a heightened awareness on the part of the narrator—who introduces herself as a "writer here in the late twentieth century", a "fifth-wave Chinese immigrant" (Yan 3)—of the epistemological configurations underwriting the official versions. She is presented as knowing what she is doing, apparently in perfect control of her material, sources and pitfalls; she seems to give preference to dialogue and communication not only with the subject of her scrutiny of whom she makes, metaleptically, her direct addressee, but equally with existing cultural, historical and political codes and discourses, going as far as to invert the perspective and turn binaries on their heads—those "foreign" read "American" "historians" (3). No epistemological impasse with her, it seems again, the question of narrative authority coming through the direct reiteration of everything she knows: "I know [your feet] are less than four inches long" (2), "I know who you were" (2) or obliquely through statements as "THIS WHO YOU ARE" (1), "You're nothing like the other girls on auction" (2) or "[…] you were a born prostitute (3). One can imagine that this narrator will know how to bring forward meaning and thematic coherence—"I'll let you show [your feet] later" (2); moreover, a prolepsis provides a glimpse, from the *incipit*, of a "romance" between the Chinese prostitute and "Chris, that white boy" (4), before deciding to consider the female character "from the very beginning" (4). Subjecting Fusang to yet another assessment through a detailed external description and focusing on her as a central character may be interpreted as or even become, the narrator concedes, just another way of marketing her as a piece of Oriental curio and not a gaze into the depths of her experience,

gestures and thoughts, a restoration of her humanity. Consequently, from the onset, her dealing with the participation of Chinese women in the historical development of the community bears the risk of staging, objectifying and exoticizing the protagonist.

In this light, for all the control, awareness and double-consciousness, the introductory scene notably also bespeaks the narrator's own intellectual confinements and difficulty in escaping conceptual cages imposed by standardized thought as well as the illusion of textual accuracy and reconstruction. It reveals her own internalizing of the same symbolic codes that she denounces, her own complicity in discourses of sexism and racism—through her presenting Fusang as a "born prostitute," used to being auctioned off; through her mentioning the desirability of the Chinese-white interracial romance—an all too common existing cultural script, and none the less through her failing to see female agency where it is —the woman on Clay Street who not only survived but made money in a hostile environment, by setting the stage herself and capitalizing on the American fascination with the most exotic—and erotic—part of her body. This points to the difficulty of articulating a rehabilitative, ideologically neutral, representation of Chinatown as gendered space, one that would not fall into the familiar pitfalls of homogenizing and essentializing tendencies.

Interestingly, in Yan's narrator's case, the aesthetic project and the engagement, through the act of writing, with spaces and identities marked by the gendered experience of immigration, take on a vital metaliterary aspect: a short autoreferential note towards the end of the *incipit* discloses them as meaningful to her in coming to terms with her own sense of identity and her own place in America: "I've never known what made me take that stride across the Pacific. We've all got ready answers—that we came for freedom, knowledge, wealth—but really we have no idea what we're after" (4). The narrator not only acknowledges her confusion as far as her own positioning is concerned, but also implies that the shaping and grounding of her own identity are dependent on the narrativization of the new location—a process illustrating Stuart Hall's observation that diasporic identity is "formed at the unstable point where the [...] stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture" (44).

In *Fusang*, this encounter is deployed by an increasing overlapping of two different spatiotemporal imaginaries, of the main character and of the narrator. Much of the complexity and ambiguity of the text builds on the narrative tension that results from an alternation of second-person narration with a third-person one, occasionally interspersed with first-person addresses; the extradiegetic narrator, although in possession of omniscience, intrudes constantly into the third-person story—a metafictional gesture that exposes the ambiguous, fragmentary and dialogic process of meaning-making in narrativizations of history and textual recoveries. A narrative strategy consisting of

passages, of interlacing episodic entries of varying lengths intensifies the idea of interaction and connection as well as that of constructedness and deferral of meaning.

In this textual composition, if Chinatown comes across as a sedimented site of ethnic memory and as an intersection of discourses, the body of the prostitute is invested as the ground on which both Chinese America and immigrant China are defined and appropriated. Indeed, readings in a Mainland China context have tended to emphasize Fusang's Chineseness, femininity, maternity and humanity, her story an allegory of "the hard, bloody and tragic history of the Chinese immigrants" (Zhang 14), whereas American and European critics have discussed her against a backdrop rich with "sensational ingredients" and highlighted her inscrutability ("From mainland to mainstream") and passivity (Miallaret). As intimated in the *incipit*, these definitions and readings are mirrored within the novel itself, where not only the narrator but also different characters compete to possess Fusang in both epistemological and sexual terms. Engaged while still in the cradle to a "master from Guangdong," a Gold Mountain sojourner whom she wedded in a ceremony where a rooster performed the part of the far-away groom, Fusang first lived, according to the customs, with her in-laws, who used her "to farm, to cook, to chop pig feed" (Yan 46). She is kidnapped, brought to the U.S. on a cargo ship, and sold into a Chinatown brothel, where she serves Asian as well as Anglo-American customers.

The body of the Chinese woman, the unmentioned casualty of a migratory system of labor is thus presented as an important site invested with conflicting nationalistic demands: on the one hand, it provides to the needs of Chinese men, sustaining not only the Chinese sojourning abroad but also the patriarchal structure of Chinese marriage, which required that the wives of sojourners remain with their husbands' families in China but equally that immigrants stay bound to the Mainland by ties of kinship; on the other hand, this gendered body ensures that Chinese men do not form families in the United States—the instability of the Chinese settlement being thus preserved and with it, the potential economic advantages of low-cost labor that West Coast politicians were seeking. On this subject, George Anthony Peffer's study of the 1875 Page Law, *If They Don't Bring Their Women Here* (1999), takes its title from Judge Lorenzo Sawyer of the US Circuit Court:

> If they don't bring their women here they would never multiply. [...]. When the Chinaman comes here and don't bring his wife out here, sooner or later he dies like a worn out steam engine; he is simply a machine, and don't leave two or three or half dozen children to fill his place. (108-09)

It is not only the fear that the Chinese might become a permanent fixture of California society that was kept in check by this transpacific network of prostitution, but also the

other danger of the Celestials' forming families with European American women, families which would "taint" the purported "purity" of the national bloodstock.
The construction of a geography or geographies of gender is defined here by an interconnection of histories and cultures, issues of sexuality being connected to "those of nationality, imperialism, migration and diaspora" (McDowell 12). While the Chinese bachelor society (procurers, gangsters and sojourner workers) tries to keep Fusang within the social and domestic space of Chinatown, the young American "john" desires her as an exotically racialized and sexualized object. Ironically again, the male characters' competing interpretations of Fusang's body mirror those of the novel's readers.

Probing the interracial romance

The sex-trafficked female character not only makes visible interlocking arrangements and systems of containment and possession, but also undermines them—and, at the same time, the limits of different types of discourses representing her. One of these, the interracial romance that the narrator probes from different angles, becomes the primary ground for articulating and mediating anxieties generated by the Asian presence in the American national space and allows glimpses of the divisions behind the confident facades, testing the American melting-pot and the American dream.
Indeed, throughout the novel, the position of narrative authority progressively disintegrates and clarifies the main motivations underlying the narrator's interest in history: by fathoming its crevices to think the connections between the past and the present, the narrator can only hope to understand the "Asian woman-white man" dyad that she herself is caught up in:

> To tell you the truth, I'm often wrong about white people. […]. Even with the white man I married I end up in ridiculous conversations because I assume I know what he's thinking. (Yan 65)

This is followed by a further disclosure poignantly pointing to this relationship as lived in a context of immigration:

> We flock to Chinatown too to limit our culture shock. We too crowd into cramped, shabby apartments, a group of us splitting the rent, a sense of safety a matter of everyone feeling equally unsafe, a sense of good luck a matter of everyone feeling equally unlucky. And then […] we begin, step by cautious step, to break out into non-

> Chinese territory. [...] I just want to look for my roots, in stories about working and studying and getting along with non-Chinese, stories about whether the moon over a foreign land is rounder than the moon back home. (153-156 passim)

By bringing to the forefront contemporary experiences and conditions of selfhood marked by isolation and displacement, the text undermines the vision of America as the land of freedom and fulfillment. In examining the (same) challenges that confront (different) generations of Chinese immigrant women and the invisible threads that bind them together, the fifth-wave newcomer effectively opens up questions about Asian subjectivity, the politics of immigrant, gendered, and sexual identities, and the cultural and social economies within which they circulate.

De facto, the Caucasian boy's infatuation with Fusang stems from a convergence of racial and sexual fantasies, paradigmatic of early and deeply ingrained exoticist beliefs and practices. When Chris first visits her he is a twelve-year-old and carries with him all the "fairy tales and adventure stories" he has consumed and the conviction that the "Orient" is "the origin of all mysteries (15). In a conflation of exoticism and eroticism, he envisions Fusang with a set of Orientalist assumptions that dismember and reduce her to a set of physical characteristics—he is using, symbolically, a mirror to magnify his vision of her. Two different gazes are evoked in the first scene uniting the two: Fusang looks at herself in her wall mirror and sees Chris reflected in it. What she does not know, as related by the narrator, is the "countless times this boy had hidden in the shadows of walls and trees to watch her [...] She didn't know that he used a little round mirror to savor every part of her [...] to capture any scene in the world as his own, however momentary, private possession" (10). In contrast to the woman's mirror that reflects Chris as he is, as a whole entity and human being, the latter's mirror breaks down Fusang's bodily image into exoticized parts to be visually feasted upon: her "deformed yet beautiful feet" (12) impress him as "fishtails", belonging to "a stage of evolution no one had ever imagined" (14), her black hair is as "impenetrable as the sky before time began" (14), her cooling the tea by breathing over it part of "a new and different temptation" (13), whereas her cracking melon seeds with her front teeth is attractive and enticing (17). These and other similar reductions of Fusang's subjectivity to elemental, archetypal features, sensations and appetites correspond to her equation with a primitive foreign and eccentric/ex-centric womanhood. The latter is imaginatively envisioned as "other" and "alien" in Western time (the Oriental subject as primeval) and Western space (the immigrant subject as unassimilable).

As evinced in this particular economy of exchange between gazes, an exchange that actually operates hierarchically, synecdochically and unidirectionally, is an interest in Chinese femininity bared down to its exoticist underpinnings. The (hetero)sexual encounter is driven

by difference, which becomes a disturbing, yet fascinating, part of that encounter. This serves as an appropriate illustration of Lisa Lowe's observations on the imbrications between exoticism and eroticism:

> [...] masculine romantic desire is often introduced as an oriental motif [and] such associations of Orientalism with romanticism are not coincidental, for the two situations of desire—the occidental fascination with the Orient and the male lover's passion for his female beloved—are structurally similar. Both depend on a structure that locates the Other—as woman or oriental scene—as inaccessible, different. (2)

By means of symbolic conceptualizations such as those illustrated above, gender and ethnicity are fused and meanings are modified by the specificities of the early Chinese immigrant context. Unsurprisingly, Chris's various conjectures about Fusang converge into a sexualized fantasy of rescue:

> In his dreams, he is much taller, brandishing a long sword. A knight of courage and passion. An Oriental princess imprisoned in a dark cell waits for him to rescue her. [...]. She sticks blood-soaked watermelon seeds one by one between her lips and makes steps of pained grace on the mutilated points of her feet. (19)

Seeing Fusang as his "private possession," Chris envisages his role as a chivalric white savior, riding to the rescue of the woman forced into prostitution and immorality at the hands of the physically and morally degenerated "yellow men" of her community. Self-fashioning himself as an embodiment of an idealist yet pragmatic manhood, Chris accompanies an increasingly strong desire for Fusang by a soaringly fierce commitment to anti-Chinese acts. Not only the rescuer of abused Oriental women, he thus invents himself as the savior of a purified nation: "He wasn't here to take part in such evil, he was here to wipe it out" (60), the "here" referring to Chinatown.

Gender and sexuality are more than physical facts; rather, they constitute primary terms through which one's ethnic identity is understood, experienced, and envisioned. Consequently, gender roles become a locus for sounding out and (re)codifying cultural meanings. As the different characters' actions are imbued with varying shades of "Chineseness" or "Americanness" to indicate the extent of their "normalcy" and appropriateness in the adopted land, Yan's narrative deals with the ever fundamental contradiction within the American collective imagery and unconsciousness between the liberal ideology of multiculturalism and the conservative preference and promotion of a homogeneous, white, Anglo-Saxon, American identity. It is in this heterosexual landscape of

desire precisely that Chris and Fusang's interactions and relations gesture toward the intersection of sexual and racial differences defining 19th century America.

In this context of affirmation of white-defined Anglo-American values against a background of virulent anti-Asian actions, there is no other alternative given to the interracial romance than to turn into rape. Chris's gaze of objectification does not only serve his own purposes, but becomes lethal: engaged in a violent raid, the youth, intoxicated with hatred and alcohol, joins a group of rioters in gang-raping a Chinese prostitute, metonym embodying the contamination, decay and degeneracy of the yellow race. This prostitute is Fusang.

Conjuring again Stuart Hall's observation that diasporic identity takes its contours where the "unspeakable stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture" (44), it is worth noticing how Yan's novel displays elastic, adaptable and porous temporalities that subvert the normative system of spatiotemporal imaginaries. It is in one of these unique moments of mediation between "here/now" and "there/then" that the narrator pleads with her 19th century female counterpart to turn her eyes away from the violence heading towards her and become instead aware of the ever-presence and persistence of xenophobic hatred in American society. Referring to a TV talk show she has just seen, the narrator imparts to Fusang a scene where an Asian American woman caller is presented with the idea of tolerance as a form of control. The skinhead interviewer explains:

> [...] If we didn't put up with you, we wouldn't be able to control our hatred and that would be worse for you. If we had some land completely separate from you, we wouldn't have to tolerate you anymore. [...] We fully believe that one day we won't have to tolerate you. We have some important work ahead of us. (Yan 208)

Alluding to realities of multiethnic societies where conventional associations linked to the idea of "tolerance" are reversed and become "heavily loaded," (in a literal and figurative sense) and gesturing to demarcated and entrenched anti-Oriental views rehearsing internal boundaries of nationhood embedded in racial meanings and power, the narrator highlights the present-day vulnerability of her community, "extremely uneasy" and "hanging under [...] threat" (208). It is thus unsurprising that simultaneously within and without borders of history and time, transhistorical correlations and con-temporal transrelations are shaped here by a complex desire to proceed to a bidirectional and dialogical juxtapositions of narratives. It is in this frame only that the narrator can turn the lens back onto the earlier concrete expression of this hatred, a hatred that "feeds on itself, simply for its own sake" (205), culminating in the scene where Fusang is represented as victim of a gang rape during the 1870s race riots. In this vein, meaning can no longer be attained by tapping into ready-made and prevalent theories or understandings. "Looking for one's roots" means border-

crossing in time and space and also cross-relating histories and cultures so as to excavate and inscribe cultural memories that would help overcome the sense of displacement and insecurity produced by the immigrant experience.

Under these circumstances, the narrative depicts how this extremely violent manifestation and imposition of white masculinized heterosexual power does not reduce Fusang to a meaningless commodity. Instead, by having her bite a button off the jacket of the only rapist that kissed her and present it to Chris several years later, when the young man returns to Chinatown hoping that she had not known he had been a part of the dreadful act or at the worst, that he could give her his own version of the even—"rehearsed [...] regrets and apologies" (249), Fusang is provided with agency. When disrobing for him, the button rolls from Fusang's bun; on seeing it, Chris comprehends that "she had even taken away his chance to tell her what he had done" (249), the woman being thus the one in control over how the experience will be narrated.

This narrative agency invests the character's final gesture of refusal of control over her body and sexuality with new and more complex meaning. Indeed, Fusang turns down the young man's proposal of marriage and leaves to prepare a wedding with her former owner, the gangster Da Yong, before his execution. Fusang's apparent submission to the institution of marriage signifies just the opposite: her marriage to a dead man becomes a liberation from intersecting patriarchal structures and configurations.

The narrator seems befuddled by Fusang's actions in relation to both Chris and Da Yong. She comments:

> You should know that I can't stand a mystery. Even if I write you off as one, I still have to have some basic grasp of what's behind it. But your smile and the look in your eyes now don't even give me that. [...]. This is the way you've always looked at people in distress or in a fistfight, for that matter: smiling as if you weren't quite there, with just a trace of surprise and a trace of pity. (261)

If in the opening section, the character is presented as the object of various defining gazes, Fusang's final look positions her as subject, not object, of the gaze. Fusang's looking back signifies survival through agency-claiming. Her refusal to be mastered and contained in and by any discursive attempt that employs essential and definitive identifications and understandings comes out of her ability to undermine and negotiate matrixes of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual associations and assignations, to embody an excess of locations—the "not quite being there." Therefore, the narrator has to acknowledge Fusang as a transgressive figure undoing normative representations, including her own similar endeavors. She realizes that her task is much more complicated than just laying bare or

denouncing the official discourses that either erase or distort the ethnic female other and its location—"It turns out that there can be so many versions of the same historical event" (274) and that despite their working on the same documents, the narrator's husband's version of history and her own "will never be the same" (247). The discursive space of the novel will have to become capable of accommodating subjectivities constituted not only or primarily by acts of dichotomization or assimilation.

Consequently, Yan's use of the interracial romance to grasp the ideological continuities and shifts in representing and thinking the "Asian woman-white man" dyad may be read as positing interracial romance as a solution to differences, while simultaneously demonstrating the impossibility of such a romance if it involves Oriental objects rather than Oriental subjects. Equally, the narrative presents us with embodiments of Chinese-American immigrant identity that do away with "either/or" choices, but at the same time find it hard to adopt the "both/and" positions of an integrated subjectivity or to testify to an itinerary of progress (from "Chinese" to "Chinese American"), not in the least because the question of belonging, for people of color in America, has to be understood not as simply a matter of choice but as always a battle against all that would label them as enduringly Other. Yan posits a discontinuous and problematic identity while effectively redefining the idea of belonging and displacement with this text: in the face of the impossibility of achieving present time identification with America, through the narrator she displays a mode of interpretation and being founded on multiplicity and multivalences of origins, sources, spaces and times. Permeability and the creation of new modes of relationality emerge from dislocation and disidentification. Along these lines, "fifth-generation immigrant" authorship comes as an interrogation into the processes of writing and representation; writing Chinatown as a gendered space becomes an experience of vision-sharpening attuned to questioning aspects of identity, assimilation/adaptation, ethnic formulation, subjectivity, and belonging. This echoes Mieke Bal's understanding of cultural memory in the present—as problematizing assumptions "in order to come to an understanding of the past that is different"; not an attempt to isolate and enshrine it in an objectivist "reconstruction," or an effort to project it on an evolutionist line, but simply "an understanding of it as an active part of the present" (Cho 27).

Conclusion

To conclude, the appropriation of a territory for the gendered self is performed in a process of dialogical relation to fragmented and heterogeneous pieces of inheritance and contemporary discourses. Side by side, they translate various historical, cultural and

psychological presences into a process that demands reimagining. Within this framework, differences themselves are (to be) deployed as a form of survival of spirit, claiming of self and creation of agency: the writing performs, at a (meta)discursive level, acts of resistance, memory, and survival, claiming participation in the discursive time of (the) nation(s). Defying conventions of both North-American- and Chinese-centered epistemic practices, the writer extends and takes to greater depths the questions that inhabit her, in a permanent intersection of familial, communal, national, textual and intertextual memories and realities, bespeaking both Asianness and Asian Americanness. This reaffirms Yan Geling's engagement with the excavation, production and preservation of cultural memory—"a nation that does not remember [...] can never be strong" (Bruhn)—, with a special concern for how ethnic, class, gender or economic issues are played out on women's bodies—"I have written stories about women suffering during wars and after wars, because I think that no matter who wins or loses, women on both sides are the ultimate victims" (Ash).

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