“Home Sweet Home”: Displacement and Belonging in Post-1960s Diasporic Chinese Literature

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“Home Sweet Home”: Displacement and Belonging in Post-1960s Diasporic Chinese Literature
by
Melody Yunzi Li

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The Graduate School
of Washington University in
partial fulfillment of the
requirement for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“Home Sweet Home”: Displacement and Belonging in Post-1960s Diasporic Chinese Literature

by

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Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature
Washington University in St. Louis, 2018
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Situated at the intersection of Sinophone and Diaspora Studies and focusing on the rhetoric of “home,” my dissertation explores the ways in which Chinese immigrant Sinophone writers and Anglophone writers in the U.S. construct “imaginative homes” in response to the absence of their physical homes. Through detailed analysis of works by Yu Lihua (Again the Palm Trees, 1967), Yan Geling (The Criminal Lu Yanshi, 2011; A Woman’s Epic, 2006), Pai Hsien-yung (Taipei People, 1971), Shi Yu (New York Lover, 2004), Chen Qian (Listen to the Caged Bird Sing, 2010), Rong Rong (Notes of a Couple, 2004) and Ha Jin (A Free Life, 2007; A Map of Betrayal, 2014), I explore the shifting dynamics of roots and routes by examining how Chinese diasporic subjects formulate their identities in negotiations between their homeland and the adopted land. Far from being an either/or binary, Chinese diasporic subjects often experience home and homelessness, uprooting and re-rooting simultaneously. This dissertation also delineates that, from a historical perspective, diasporic Chinese’s experience of home has shifted from being nationally affiliated in 1960s–70s overseas Chinese student writings to being personally oriented in post-1980s Chinese immigrant writings. This study of “home” in diasporic Chinese writings bridges Chinese diaspora and Sinophone studies, and further highlights the heterogeneity and complexity of the notion of “home.”
Introduction

Redefining Home in Diasporic Chinese Literature¹

You must go to a country without borders, 
where you can build your home…  
…You must go there, quietly. 
Leave behind what you still cherish. 
Once you enter that domain, 
a path of flowers will open before your feet.²  
(Ha Jin, A Free Life 660)

This project investigates literary texts written by Chinese immigrants to the United States. Situated at the intersection of Sinophone and diaspora studies, it explores how Chinese immigrant writers in the U.S. from the 1960s to the present—writers including Yu Lihua (b.1931), Pai Hsien-yung 白先勇 (b.1937), Yan Geling 嚴歌苓 (b.1958), Shi Yu 施雨 (b.1965), Chen Qian 陳謙, Rong Rong 融融, and Ha Jin 哈金 (b.1956)³—construct “imaginative homes” in response to the absence of their physical homes. Chinese diasporic subjects experience a sense of national and racial non-belonging, which I call the “vulnerabilities of home.” This is a flexible term that suggests both the unstable mindsets of Chinese immigrants and the tentative notion of home they long for and construct. In studying the “vulnerabilities of home,” I focus on how Chinese diasporic subjects formulate their identities in the constantly

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¹ Part of this chapter was previously published. See Melody Yunzi Li, “Home and Identity En Route in Chinese Diaspora—Reading Ha Jin’s A Free Life,” Pacific Coast Philology 49, no.2 (2014): 203–220.


³ In this dissertation, all translations of the works by Yu Lihua, Yan Geling, Shi Yu, Chen Qian and Rong Rong are mine unless otherwise noted.
shifting dynamics between homeland and adopted land. Chinese diasporic subjects often experience home and homelessness, uprooting and re-rooting not as binaries but as shifting, simultaneous conditions. The rhetoric of home in Chinese immigrant literature not only portrays the complexity of Chinese immigrants’ cultural identity but also indicates a desire to challenge the fixed identity labels they are assigned.

My interest in the concept of “home” begins with my personal experience of constant movement and “homelessness”—until age three I was sheltered in my father’s house; from then until age eighteen I lived with my unwelcoming grandparents; after that I attended schools in Zhuhai, Guangzhou, Hong Kong and the United States. This wandering has had two effects on me: on the one hand, I have become very self-reliant, easily adapting to wherever I find myself, talking to whomever I come across. I tell others I am a world citizen, because I can easily move anywhere without feeling homesick, and get to know people; on the other hand, I do not actually feel that I belong anywhere. I live with a strong desire to seek a place that I could call home, yet my vulnerabilities always unsettle me before I can feel settled in that place. I may be too used to a sense of homesickness and homelessness, almost to the extent of finding comfort in it. Yet my craving for a home never dissipates. I find this dynamic of home and homesickness/homelessness intriguing. Growing up in an Overseas Chinese Village (Huaqiao cun 華僑村) in Guangzhou, I observed a group of people who also shares these complex feelings towards “home”—overseas Chinese.

All these experiences have led me to re-conceptualize the notion of home as existing beyond local and national boundaries. I find it unsatisfactory to define my home either as China or the United States, but see it rather as forming from a combination and rejection of both. At times I feel I belong more to China, sometimes to America, and still other times I reject both, as
if I don’t belong in either place. Thus my personal journey has led me to study the notion of home.

The word “home” evokes some common perceptions. Normally we identify home as some place or thing which we all have and to where/which we can return. Below are some common definitions of home:

- Home is a place that we can identify with, where we believe we belong to, where we return after we go away;
- Home is someone that we can trust and relate to;
- Home is a community of friends that we can rely on, who can console and comfort us when we are sad, and who help when we are in need.

Home is a composite of all these: the who, the where, and the what; and what makes them “home” to us is the feeling that we are part of and can identify with it/them—a sense of belonging. These diverse, complex perceptions show home to be an extremely fluid, frequently shifting construct, shaped by multiple variables. For example, home might be somewhere that you once lived but which is now destroyed and shattered; or it might be someone whom you once identified as your refuge but who has since betrayed or abandoned you; or perhaps your home has shifted because of changes in your own life, which have made a place or a situation foreign to you. The sense of belonging is therefore not fixed, but can shift in relation to the nation, place, people or community to which one once felt close. “Home”— a sense of belonging—is not *a priori*. It is generated through experience and emotions, and develops and changes as those elements do. To speak metaphorically, we might describe “home” as a result of some chemical reaction, so the addition and reduction of each element would affect what “home” mean. At the same time, not only would those chemical compounds (place, people, nation)
change but the formula would change as well. Each of these compounds would also react to each other in different ways. The product they all generate together as “home” also develops through time, making “home” a historical, cultural and emotional construct.

The concept of home is especially fraught in diasporic writings since diaspora by definition involves movement and interaction between time, places, people, and cultures. Home for diasporic subjects is a multi-dimensional and multilayered construction that generates diasporic identities, and helps diasporic subjects to navigate through racial, gender and national convulsions. The reconstruction of home is not only a form of relocation, but more of a dislocation and dis-location. Particularly for the post-1960s Chinese immigrant writings I discuss that deal with Chinese and American cultures and identities, the authors attempt to break down the binaries between Communism and Capitalism, East and West, and at the same time show that the construction is not a matter of simply relocating from one place to the other. Home is re-situated along routes followed during the diasporic journey, but the places where the diasporic subjects relocate have been constantly changing. Diaspora are displaced from the physical/traditional space of home, and develop a mixed feeling of attraction and repulsion to the new land. In response to this, they establish a new sense of home in the process of attaching and detaching themselves from different places. This dynamic of attaching and detaching defines the mobile conceptualization of home in existing diasporic discourse. My research on “home” does not reject the mobility of the concept in existing diaspora theories, but builds upon this mobility and emphasizes the emotional struggles of diasporic subjects. In this dissertation I mostly refer to “home” as an emotional sense of belonging, although at times I also refer to home as the specific, physical, material space from which my subjects find a sense of belonging, including
body, family and nation. Understanding home as an emotive concept challenges labels and categories of diasporic literature and subjects.

The notion of home in contemporary Chinese immigrant writings is not singular but a multiple, manifesting in different spheres: nation, family, relationships, individual achievements, etc. Different chapters of my dissertation demonstrate the representation of home in these various spheres. For 1960s and 1970s overseas Chinese students who first retreated to Taiwan before moving to the United States, their sense of home was largely determined by their national identity, reflected in their obsession with their imagined homeland China. Family, as conceived in opposition to the political context of the time, determines the sense of home in Yan Geling’s novels set during the Cultural Revolution. Cosmopolitan free-spirited subjects define their sense of home and identities through their affectionate relationships and attachments in post-1990s Chinese immigrant writings. Another contemporary Anglophone writer, Ha Jin, has his immigrant figures identify home between the two worlds of China and the United States, and yet they find the fantasy of inhabiting multiple homes and identities has collapsed. These mutations, as defining the sense of home shifts from national to inter-personal to individual, indicate the changing conceptualization of self-identities and home in the process of voluntary or involuntary migration. Although these mutations show a certain trend and development over time in Chinese immigrant history, clear lines do not divide the categories which are inevitably connected. More importantly, the boundary-crossing of all elements that constitute home challenges the discourse of locations/locating in diaspora studies.

Home in these Chinese immigrant writings is constantly being remade, recreated, negotiated, and redefined. For these Chinese immigrant authors, I argue, writing about home is their way to reject being defined or located, a response to society’s impulse to do both of those
things. Since home is an emotional space through which immigrant subjects construct their identities in relation to different social, spatial and historical circumstances, dis-locating home suggests the flexibility and vulnerabilities of their identities as immigrants. More importantly, my work not only reaffirms the multiplicity and fluidity of “home” as shown in previous scholarship on diaspora studies, but also emphasizes diasporic writers’ denial of the possibility of locating a home. Thus my dissertation traces the changing conceptualization of home in diasporic Chinese literature from the 1960s to the present, finding that the concept of home is not based on the actual political connections between China and Taiwan, China and the United States, but on the connections generated by the emotional struggles of the diasporic individuals. This finding further complicates the way diaspora studies has conceived how the notion of home is formulated.

1. Identity Labels and Their Challenges

The shifting dynamics in the construction of home also reflect the ambiguity of the identity labels imposed on the diasporic individuals. I encountered great difficulty when trying to categorize the writers in my dissertation. These writers could be Chinese immigrants, overseas Chinese students, Chinese Americans, expatriates, sojourners, or exiles, or they could be none of these. The term “Chinese immigrant” often refers to a Chinese person who comes to live permanently in another country. Overseas Chinese students (liuxuesheng 留学生) refer to those who were born in China and Taiwan and resided overseas and continue to live in the States. In literary scholarship, the study of liuxuesheng has largely been focused on Taiwanese students
living in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. The term “Chinese American” has been through several changes, but essentially it implies a person’s identity as an American of Chinese descent; unlike the hyphenated term “Chinese-American,” “Chinese American” takes “Chinese” as an adjective modifying the subject “American.” This term is Anglo-centric and reinforces “American” as its center. Expatriate may be a good term to describe those who left China, Hong Kong, or Taiwan and currently live and work in the United States, but it does not necessarily imply that they have renounced the identity of their birthplace. “Sojourner,” similarly, refers to people who temporarily reside in a place. The “exile” suggests people who have been expelled from their country for political or punitive reasons. Scholars also use it to include self-imposed exiles who escape political and social oppression.

My chosen writers encompass characteristics of all these labels; in some ways, they fit all of them imperfectly and fit none of them precisely. For these reasons, I employ the neutral term “Sinophone immigrant writers.” Instead of reading these writers in a way that consigns them to any single category, which would mean denying the process of constant redefinition and transformation that their identities go through, I focus on their uprooting, re-rooting processes, which are largely represented through the experience of “home” in their writing. Their works

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4 Cynthia Wong notes the importance of Sinophone works in Chinese American canon formation in the late 1990s. She writes, “as translation can play, has played, and will continue to play a decisive role in the formation of Chinese American canon, important Chinese language works will be noted as well.” See Cynthia Wong, “Chinese American Literature,” in *An Interethic Companion to Asian American Literature*, ed. King-Kok Cheung (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1997), 41. Shan Te-hsing redefines “Chinese American literature,” and emphasizes that it is not limited to ethnic background, but includes Chinese diasporic works written in Chinese, named “HuawenMeiguo wenxue.” See Shan Te-hsing, “An Emerging Literature / Research: Taiwan’s Asian American Literature and Native Americans Residents Literature” 冒現的文學/研究: 台灣的亞美文學研究—兼論美國原住民文學研究, Chung-Wai Literary Monthly 中外文學 29.11 (2001):19.

5 In one of her interviews, Maxine Hong Kingston insists that the hyphen in “Chinese-American” must be crossed out because of the equivalence of either part shown in the phrase. Maxine Hong Kingston, “Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers,” in *Asian and Western Writers in Dialogue*, ed. Guy Amirthanayagam (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1982), 55–65.
display both how “home” can be reconstructed away from home, and the push-and-pull
dynamics on diasporic Chinese’s journey between homeland and adopted land.

Previous scholarship on these writings tends to be either Sino-centric or Western-centric.
The writers in my study are largely categorized by Chinese critics as “lūmei zuojia” 旅美作家, a
term that imagines the Chinese writers as sojourners or travelers, who do not fully belong to the
U.S. This thinking is very Sino-centric whereas its closest equivalent term in an American
context—Chinese American, which mostly refers to those who have already earned U.S.
citizenship—is similarly Anglo-centric. These two nationalistic terms in two different cultures
establish binaries in the field that limit the scope of scholarship on Chinese expatriate writings in
the United States. Similarly, the terms “haiwai huaren wenxue” 海外華人文學 (literature
written by overseas Chinese) and “haiwai huawen wenxue” 海外華文文學 (overseas Chinese
literature) have been used to refer to works produced by overseas Chinese writers, based on the
ethnicity of the writers or the language authors write in, respectively, and regardless of where the
writers are living when they author their works. The similar terms in the context of the United
States are meiguo huaren wenxue 美國華人文學 (American Chinese [writers’] literature) and
meiguo huawen wenxue 美國華文文學 (American Chinese [language] literature). Although the
latter term is more commonly used and discussed in current scholarship, the former term meiguo
huaren wenxue is more inclusive because it also applies to works written in Chinese or any other
language. Writers in my dissertation all belong to this group as meiguo huaren zuojia 美國華人

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作家, including the ones that write in Chinese like Yan Geling, Pai Hsien-yung and Yu Lihua, and Ha Jin who writes in English. As Sau-ling Cynthia Wong points out, there are updated versions of the two terms: “haiwai huaren wenxue” and “haiwai huawen wenxue” (both translate as “overseas Chinese literature,” the former emphasizing the identity of the authors the latter highlighting the language); “shijie huaren wenxue” 世界華人文學 and “shijie huawen wenxue,” 世界華文文學 (both translate as “global Chinese literature”) which is a “re-valuation, a rebranding of sorts.”

“Haiwai” 海外 (overseas) suggests “the process of scattering” because understanding the Chinese outside China as being “overseas” defines China as the center. By contrast, “shijie” (global) ignores the issue of center/origin and “connotes an ambition to make one’s presence known and appreciated in the world.” Among these terms “shijie huawen wenxue” may sound the most suitable in this transnational age; however, it could also fall into Sino-centrism because it seeks to enhance the global power of the Sinophone community and privileges the centrality of the Chinese language. Moreover, it cannot capture the routing experience as much as some of the other terms.

Although “lùMei zuojia” (Chinese expatriate writers in the U.S.) might be the most adequate term to describe the writers in this study, I use the neutral term Chinese immigrant in the dissertation for several reasons: first, writers in my work all have unique experiences and relationships to their homeland and their adopted land, i.e., Yan Geling is famously considered as “lùmei zuojia” and is sometimes even thought of as a Chinese writer because her biggest market

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8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
is on Mainland China, whereas Ha Jin is an exile having been expelled from Mainland China. Because of such political diversity, it is easier to group them under the neutral term “Chinese immigrant.” Second, the word “immigrant” and its implied activity migration, suggests the dislocation that I want to stress. Compared to Ha Jin’s idea of “writer as migrant,” which emphasize the writer’s displacement and forced assimilation in the foreign land, the term “immigrant writer” stresses the pull and push dynamic between the homeland and adopted land, as well as the tension and movement between the two.

2. Roots and Routes in Diaspora Studies

The basic methodological framework of this dissertation grows from diaspora and Sinophone theories. Since both theories emphasize dispersion and migration, they are valuable in discussing Chinese immigrant communities. My dissertation argues that the study of contemporary Chinese immigrants should occupy the dual-space of diaspora and Sinophone studies. It engages prominent works in the Chinese diaspora, Chinese overseas, Sinophone and Chinese American studies, which are concerned with transnational cultural circulation. In the following I will review the study of home in both diaspora studies and Sinophone studies in order to situate my research in the larger fields.

Diaspora, meaning the transnational movement of both a large population and the individuals who undertake such movements, destabilizes fixed notions of home and identity. At

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10 For details, see Ha Jin, The Writer as Migrant (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

times, however, traditional definitions of diaspora have focused on fixed concepts like “roots” and “the homeland.” For example, William Safran lists the following when he defines diasporas, or “expatriate minority communities”:

1) They, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original “center” to two or more “peripheral,” or foreign, regions;

2) They retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland;

3) They believe they are not - and perhaps cannot be - fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it;

4) They regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return;

5) They believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland; and

6) They continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another.  

This definition emphasizes the orientation to, and especially a collective memory of, the homeland. In emphasizing this attachment, Safran sees “homeland” as a fixed notion. In the same essay, he further demonstrates the “pull” and “push” factors that typify diasporas’ desire to return to the homeland. In the passage above, Safran attributes this longing to the history and myths of their homeland, as well as the collective memory they share with people from that homeland. These are the “pull” factors for diasporas’ return; the “push” factors are represented in “a feeling of otherness, of alienation, or of a lack of hospitality on the part of the host society.” Safran attributes diasporas’ longing for homeland to “pull” factors from the old world and “push” factors in the new world. This notion fails, however, to capture the ambivalence diasporas can feel in relation to both their original home and their new home. Although

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13 Ibid.
14 Ibid, 96.
“homeland” easily conjures up a physical locale, to diasporas it is always reformulated and transformed along with their migration. Therefore, seeing the relationship between diasporas’ physical location and their homeland as a simple binary, as Safran does, is problematic.

This fixed notion has been challenged by later critics, who conceptualize diasporic identity based on fluidity and anti-essentialism. Conventional notions of “home” are challenged in a world filled with migration and diaspora, as John McLeod observes:

> Conventional ideas of ‘home’ and ‘belonging’ depend upon clearly defined, static notions of being ‘in place,’ firmly rooted in a community or particular geographical location. But these models or ‘narratives’ of belonging no longer seem suited to a world where the experience and legacy of migration are altering the ways in which individuals think of their relation to place.15

In the field of diaspora studies, postcolonial studies, and cultural geography, current views understand identity as constantly in flux and in the making. Distinct from identity as a fixed notion—“an already accomplished fact”—Stuart Hall argues that identity should be read as “never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.”16

In response to Safran’s definition of diaspora in particular, other theorists have raised the idea of a “routed identity” that implies the interplay of “push” and “pull” forces. In the context of the trans-Atlantic black slave trade, Paul Gilroy points out the problems of previous diasporic studies: “Modern black political culture has always been more interested in the relationship of identity to roots and rootedness than in seeing identity as a process of movement and mediation that is more appropriately approached via the homonym routes.”17 In contrast to Safran, Gilroy

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defines diaspora not so much in relation to a homeland, but instead to people’s movements: their migration, not where they come from. Later critics like Avtar Brah and James Clifford both celebrate the hybridity and multiplicity of diaspora as a means of understanding the globalized world and consider diaspora to be a process.\(^{18}\) Emphasizing diasporas’ routed identity as such problematizes the traditional notions of “home” and even “diaspora” in diasporic discourse.

The “routed” approach suggests that the dynamic is not simply a push from the new world and a pull from the old. Rather, the old world pushes and pulls, as does the new. The immigrants are pulled and pushed in multiple directions in multiple ways, and the process continually renews and repeats itself. The push and pull forces from both worlds constitute a mechanism causing the diasporic subjects to be always moving between the two and never arriving; in other words, they are always “en route.” In such a process, home is not equal to homeland anymore, but becomes a multiplicity on diaspora’s routes, and may really represent multiple homes. As Wendy Walters claims, “The notion of diaspora can represent a multiple, plurilocal, constructed location of home, thus avoiding ideas of fixity, boundedness, and nostalgic exclusivity traditionally implied by the word home.”\(^{19}\) Since diasporic subjects can establish homes along their routes, the original home they set off from is replaced by multiple homes generated along their migratory routes. Helena Grice specially associates the concept of “home” with diasporic identity. For Asian American diasporic subjects, she argues, “home” is not a singular geographical location, but “may be contested, lost, out of reach or exist

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\(^{19}\) Wendy W. Walters, *At Home in Diaspora: Black International Writing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xvi.
simultaneously in different locations.”  

In other words, diaspora’s sense of home constantly goes through disruption, negotiation, reconstruction, and transformation on different sites in their diasporic routes.

In postmodern diasporic discourse, the meaning of home shifts along with the process of migration. In an anthropological survey of migrants in Sarfalao, Jesper Bjarnesen argues that home “signifies a continuous process of emplacement.” Because the identities of people on-the-move like immigrants are being constantly negotiated with their homeland and new culture, their conceptualized “home” moves accordingly, flexible and malleable along the paths of migration. This approach suggests a shift in emphasis from home-seeking to home-making: instead of focusing on the connection with homeland like Safran’s earlier definition of diaspora, these recent theories explore the trajectories of diasporic subjects’ deconstruction and reconstruction of their home. They pay more attention to the “making” of home. Cultural geography theorists Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling summarize certain themes revolving around the relationship between diaspora and home: “the relationships between home and homeland, the existence of multiple homes, diverse home-making practices, and the intersections of home, memory, identity and belonging.”

The relationship between “home” and concepts of diaspora and immigration as reflected

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21 Postmodern conceptualizations of “home” are based on the fluid and unstable nature of identities; therefore the idea of home is flexible and dynamic. As Rapport and Dawson argue, “in a world of movement, home becomes an arena where differing interests struggle to define their own spaces within which to localize and cultivate their identity.” See Andrew Dawson & Nigel Rapport eds., Migrants of Identity: Perceptions of ‘Home’ in a World of Movement (New York: Berg, 1998), 17.


in the above theories is always in flux. The dynamic between the two is summarized in the afterword of Transforming Diaspora (2011): “Homeland and diasporic cultures mirror each other in a symbiosis of codependence or paralysis, but they also have the capacity to engage and nudge each other in various directions in a healthy, dialogic relationship.” The word “dialogic” emphasizes the active interactions between these notions. This dialogic relationship deconstructs the conventional, fixed notion of “home” and reconstructs it as a fluid, flexible concept. The identity en route/constantly in transit represents a theoretical attempt to deconstruct the one-dimensional, fixed, and overly simplistic link between Home and Exile/Diaspora.

The transition from a “root” approach to a “route” approach to defining “home” demonstrates the trend of transnationalism and globalization in literary and cultural studies. A recent study points out how diaspora/immigration and changing notions of home affect the literary scene: “The flow of populations, the mobility of individuals, the ever growing crossing of borders and the blurring of the concept of ‘home’ have produced a range of transnational literatures and other forms of cultural production that extend the field of the postcolonial in productive ways.” The redefinition of home challenges the boundaries set up by postcolonial studies, like nation and national identities, for instance. Since the exiting postcolonial studies focus on the subject of national identity, my project, which focuses on individual emotional experiences, broadens our understanding of social and political relationships as examined in postcolonial studies.

Chinese diaspora studies follow the existing trends of works that study Jewish and

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African diasporas, and embrace the idea of the *en route* identity which is constantly in the making. In this approach, home becomes a site where diasporic subjects’ subjectivity is performed; as Rey Chow states, “home is here, in my migranthood.” This idea celebrates rather than laments on-the-move identities. The flexibility and dynamism provides a space where diasporic subjects’ sense of identity and belonging can be constituted. Khun Eng Kuah-Pearce, through studying voluntary organizations among the diasporic Chinese, suggests that subjects can establish layered identities to accommodate multiple identities at different times and spaces. Aiwha Ong proposes “flexible citizenship” as a tactic transnational Chinese adopt to take advantage of work, education and investment opportunities, anchoring homes in multiple locales.

However, the use of the term diaspora has been challenged in recent years. As early as 2005, Rogers Brubaker pointed to the overuse of the term, arguing that it extended too far from its original Jewish roots. Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies ceased publication in 2009. Shu-mei Shih, while justifying her concept of “Sinophone,” argues against the term “diaspora,” claiming that it has an expiration date. She believes those who have lived in their adopted land for several generations should be granted a chance to be locals. But “‘to be a local,’ or ‘localization’ is not easy,” Sinophone literature scholar Tee Kim Tong maintains, “if there’s an expiration date for diaspora then perhaps it’s not localization but ‘re-diaspora’ or ‘post-diaspora.’” In his important essay he not only challenges Shih’s concept but also draws

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28 She mentions this in both of her *Visuality and Culture* and “Against Diaspora.”


our attention to the specific technological and digital age we live in, when space and time shifts too rapidly for us to catch up. He points out that the current digital age causes us to live in the state of diaspora wherever we are.

In debating Shih’s claims, Lingchei Letty Chen reaffirms the possibility of defining diaspora as a state of being. Deviating from the focus on spatial and temporal dimensions in earlier diaspora studies, Chen redefines “diaspora” as “a state of being, an existential condition, and an emotional and psychic disruption.” In her study of the memories diasporic subjects carry in Sinophone fiction, Chen argues that “‘diaspora’ never ends (even) when ‘Sinophone’ begins.”

This definition challenges the optimistic notions of diaspora, and highlights diasporic subjects’ feelings of displacement and alienation. Following Chen’s definition of “diaspora” as an emotive concept that suggests an existential state, I seek to investigate the inherent struggles of diasporic subjects in Chinese diasporic writers’ works and their lives.

3. Re-defining “Home” in Sinophone Studies

Sinophone has emerged as a useful concept in analyzing Chinese immigrant literature, yet it presents its own problems. In the following I will review the concept of Sinophone, its pros and cons, and how it can interact with diaspora studies as the basic framework for my project.

Shu-mei Shih first discussed her version of “Sinophone” in her 2004 article. Later in 2007, Shih defined it as “a network of places of cultural production outside China and on the margins of China and Chineseness, where a historical process of heterogenizing and localizing of continental Chinese culture has been taking place for several centuries.” Shih’s concept of “Sinophone” calls for a new understanding of China and Chineseness. She argues that the dispersed Chinese populations in the world should be conceptualized based on their Sinitic-language cultures. The notion of “Sinophone” indeed questions China’s homogenized identity, provoking critics to rethink the nation’s boundaries. However, Shih’s definition has been criticized for its imprecision. In a review of Shih’s book, Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu points out the problems of Shih’s Francophone/Sinophone analogy, since “China is indeed the ancestral home of numerous Chinese-dialect using settlers around the world, whereas France is not the ancestral home of French-speaking people in its former colonies in Africa, the Middle East, Latin American, and Indochina.” In response to this, Shih, in her 2011 essay “The Concept of the Sinophone,” elaborates on the historical construction of her term and argues that the Han

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Kim-tong Tee also distinguishes Sinophone from Anglophone and Francophone studies to the extent that the Chinese language is the mother tongue rather than an ex-colonizer’s language. See Tee-kim Tong, “(Remapping) Sinophone Literature,” in Global Chinese Literature, 77–93.
Chinese empire with its Han settler colonialism and immigration out of China has constructed Sinophone communities. This does seem to answer Lu’s comment: overseas communities in Southeast Asia and Taiwan have been “overseas” for centuries and are still identified as “Chinese” and the non-Han peoples of Taiwan, Yunnan, Xizang, Xinjiang and elsewhere have been forced to ‘become’ “Chinese” by having been forced to learn Mandarin Chinese. In her latest edited book, 2013’s *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader*, she emphasizes that this critical approach does indeed views China as an imperial power.

Based on the discourse of colonization and Sinification, the concept of Sinophone helps us better understand and draw attention to works by non-Han Chinese writers like Shen Congwen (1902–1988) and Lao She (1899–1966), or Taiwanese authors writing during the period when Mandarin was imposed under Nationalist rule. As a larger goal, Sinophone studies also challenges the long-established, uneven and hierarchical relationship between the East and West. In her “Theory, Asia and Sinophone,” Shih points out that theory is often Euro-American, rather than Asian in origin. Sinophone theory does not look to the West to define China but instead challenges this hierarchy, showing that China has exerted imperial power as much as the West.

Sinophone discourse also provokes scholars to rethink Chinese modernity, which has been theorized largely through Western scholarship. Sinophone studies instead examines the relationship between China and marginal Sinophone communities, theorizing Asia without

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35 Previously these writers were usually considered to be mainstream Chinese writers, but viewing them through the lens of Sinophone opens up a political and social view into how minority writers respond to the colonizing power of China. See Brian Bernards, “From Diasporic Nationalism to Transcolonial Consciousness: Lao She’s Singaporean Satire, Little Po’s Birthday,” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, 26, no.1 (2014): 1–40.

constant reference to the West. In doing so, Sinophone studies also undermines “the prevailing discourse of Chinese victimhood at the hands of Western empires.” Shih argues that, although victimhood is inevitable in modern Chinese literature, we cannot ignore the imperial consciousness the texts portray. Previous discourse on victimhood sees it as a bridge between selfhood and nationhood during the May Fourth period; as Jing Tsu argues, “laying claim to a national community of pain, suffering becomes that encapsulating feature of the modern epoch that brings together the self in agony with the nation in peril.” In the formative years of modern China and the making of new national identities, victimhood became a drive for individuals to form a collective force to achieve cultural modernity in the early twentieth century. Because of the Western invasions, starting with the Opium War, and semi-colonialism, narratives of failure and victimhood dominate May Fourth literature. At the end of Yu Dafu’s most famous story, “Sinking” (Chenlun 沉淪, 1921), the male protagonist yells, “O China, my China, you are the cause of my death!” An alienated exile in Japan, the protagonist blames his motherland for his weakness and fragility. Shu-mei Shih argues that the narratives of failure and victimhood mask China’s imperial unconsciousness. From this perspective, this Chinese male protagonist’s despondence in “Sinking” is largely due to the unconscious and imperial belief that the Chinese are superior to the Japanese. In other words, the suffering of the male character in “Sinking” arises from his belief that China, as the superior culture, deserves to dominate. This


38 Ng Kim Chew criticizes Shu-mei Shih’s depiction of Mainland China as an imperial power, arguing that she confuses “imperialism” with “migration.” See Ng Kim Chew “zheyang de ‘huayu yuxi’ lun keyi xiu yi!—Shi Shu-mei de ‘fan lisan’ daodi zai fan shenme?” 這様的「華語語系」論可以休矣！—史書美的「反離散」到底在反什麼？[This “Sinophone” debate should stop!—what is Shih against indeed in her “Against Diaspora?”], https://sobooks.tw/sinophone-literature-review/ (accessed Jan 16, 2018).


consciousness of the imperial nature of Chinese civilization provides readers a new framework for understanding and critiquing the diasporic consciousness of Chinese living outside Mainland China. Combining Jing Tsu and Shu-mei Shih’s positions, my dissertation argues that their many conceptions of homeland enable diasporic Chinese to re-establish a new home, meanwhile pointing out that some nationalistic Chinese’s obsession with their homeland is both a cause of and a cure for Nationalist Chinese’s homesickness.

Shu-mei Shih’s notion of Sinophone has inspired scholars to rethink the conditions and concept of Sinophone literature, its geopolitical implications, its spatial and temporal boundaries, and its methodological feasibility. For instance, E. K. Tan, Alison Groppe and Brian Bernard have done important studies on the Chinese imaginaries and literary representations of Southeast Asia;\(^{41}\) Jing Tsu urges scholars to pay serious consideration to the sound and script in Sinophone literature and to conceptualizing relations between the two;\(^{42}\) Chia-rong Wu’s work on Taiwan facilitates a Sinophone reading of Taiwanese literature and culture;\(^{43}\) David Der-wei Wang proposes the term “post-loyalism” to highlight the politics of time and memory in Sinophone Taiwanese writings.\(^{44}\) In 2011, Cambria Press started a Sinophone World Series. Sinophone studies have thus produced works focused on Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia; comparatively little research, however, has been conducted on Sinophone writers in the West.\(^{45}\)

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\(^{43}\) Chia-rong Wu, *Supernatural Sinophone Taiwan and Beyond* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2016).


\(^{45}\) When Shu-mei Shih first gave “Sinophone” critical theorization, she mentioned three categories: continental colonialism, settler colonialism and overseas migration. Chinese American literature would be included into the third category. Although there have been discussions and papers in collections and conferences about Sinophone
Although the concept of Sinophone offers us a new lens for examining cultural productions in pan-Sinophone areas, the notion is problematic in some ways. First, the concept itself, as Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu points out, “would artificially divide Chinese-language expressions between China, on the one hand, and whatever is outside China, on the other hand.” Although Shih’s concept aims to move away from China-centrism, the construction of Sinophone is based on the binary of center versus “margins,” “Chinese” versus “Sinophone.” Even though it valorizes Chinese language literature produced outside Mainland China, Shih’s notion still divides Sinophone works from Chinese literature produced by Han Chinese in Mainland China. Perhaps to account for this, David Der-wei Wang extends Shih’s notion of Sinophone literature to include Chinese literature produced by writers of Han ethnicity inside Mainland China. Because of the “diversity, fluidity and hybridity” of Sinophone literature, Wang argues that the term must be inclusive rather than exclusive. Therefore, Wang concludes that Sinophone studies should include all Sino-communities including Mainland China, Taiwan and other Sinophone areas, and that only by doing so would we be able to embrace the multiple voices and divergent forces in Chinese literature. Wang’s notion is definitely more convincing if Sinophone literature is simply defined as literature written in Chinese. But this discussion then would not add much to the concept of Chinese literature.

Chinese American literature, Chinese American literature (in both English and Chinese) is still largely discussed in the framework of Asian American and diaspora studies.

46 Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, review of Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific.

47 Shih’s exclusion of literature produced on Mainland China is related to her political stance. Her concept of Sinophone literature distinguishes literature in Chinese produced on the margins from Chinese literature from Mainland China.

Second, Shih claims that the concept of Sinophone opposes the term “Chinese diaspora.” Shih rightly identifies problems in the study of Chinese diaspora: “Its inability to see beyond Chineseness as an organizing principle and the lack of communication with other scholarly paradigms such as ethnic studies in the United States.” However her critique of Chinese diaspora is biased. Although some early studies of Chinese diaspora focus on the question of “Chineseness,” recent studies have emerged in various fields including history, anthropology, literary studies and cultural studies that move well beyond the question of Chineseness. Rey Chow’s *Writing Diaspora* (1993), for instance, has already laid the groundwork to critique the misleading unity of the term “Chineseness.” She too has pointed out, earlier than Shih, Chinese intellectuals’ obsession with China and its power. Indeed Chow clearly explains that, “part of the goal of ‘writing diaspora’ is, thus, to unlearn that submission to one’s ethnicity such as ‘Chineseness’ as the ultimate signified even as one continues to support movements for democracy and human rights in China, Hong Kong, and elsewhere.”

Meanwhile, there have been studies of Chinese diaspora that situate themselves in the intersection of Asian American literary critique, comparative multiculturalism, and ethnic

49 In response to Shih’s notion in “Against Diaspora,” Lingchei Letty Chen re-validates the term by providing a new understanding of ‘diaspora’, arguing that it can be “a state of being, an existential condition, and an emotional and psychic disruption.” See her “When does ‘diaspora’ end and ‘Sinophone’ begin?” *Postcolonial Studies* 18, no.1 (2015): 52–66.


51 In 1991, Tu Weiming raised the notion of “Cultural China” to tackle the question of “Chineseness” by showing the dispersed power of China proper. See Tu Weiming, “Cultural China: The Periphery as the Center,” in *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader*, eds. Shu-mei Shih, Chien-Hsian Tsai, and Brian Bernards (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 145–157. Ien Ang notes that Tu’s notion of “cultural China” does not get away with Chinese ethnocentrism. Her study, however, still largely focuses on Chineseness. See Ien Ang, “Can One Say No to Chineseness? Pushing the Limits of the Diasporic Paradigm,” in *Sinophone Studies*, 57–73. In giving a positive response to Ang’s rhetorical question, Shu-mei Shih justifies the relational identity construct of Sinophone peoples and the calls for the need to reflect the study of China. See Shih, “Issues and Controversies,” in *Sinophone Studies*, 18–19. Another scholar who was among one of the first to present the notion of Chineseness early on is Wang Gungwu. See Wang Gungwu, “Chineseness: The Dilemmas of Place and Practice,” in *Sinophone Studies*, 131–144.

studies. To name just a few: Sheng-mei Ma’s *Immigrant Subjectivities in Asian American and Asian Diaspora Literatures* (1998), Su Zheng’s *Claiming Diaspora: Music, Transnationalism, and Cultural Politics in Asian/Chinese America* (2010), and Wen Jin’s *Pluralist Universalism: An Asian Americanist Critique of U.S. and Chinese Multiculturalisms* (2012). All of these works engage in ethnic studies, Asian American studies and diaspora studies in an interdisciplinary way, which, collectively, demonstrates that Shih’s characterization of diaspora studies’ isolation from other fields is both factually and philosophically incorrect.

4. **The Crossroads of Sinophone and Diaspora Studies**

I read Sinophone and Chinese diaspora theories as complementary rather than conflicting. Shu-mei Shih reads the category of Chinese diaspora as a reinforcement of “Western and other non-Western (such as American and Malaysian) racialized constructions of Chineseness as perpetually foreign (“diasporic”) and hence Chinese immigrants as not qualified to be authentic locals.”

Instead of reading the category of Chinese diaspora as a barrier to considering Chinese immigrants as qualified locals as Shih does, I see the studies of Chinese diaspora as emphasizing immigrants’ inevitable links to their homeland, as well as the process of assimilating into local cultures or their establishing local identities in their adopted land. These two emphases on the relations of diasporic Chinese to a homeland and the difficulties they raise, however, do not deny Chinese immigrants’ ability to assimilate in the new land or clash with the fundamental conceptions of Sinophone studies including that immigrants have a right to be localized.

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In fact, Chinese immigrants’ inevitable connection to their homeland, which diaspora studies emphasize, plays an important role as the basis of Sinophone studies. Take for example the *waishengren* (mainlanders who retreated to Taiwan following the Nationalist government after 1945) figures in overseas Chinese student literature. As Chapter Two demonstrates, the diasporic experience *waishengren* have had in Taiwan and in the United States enhances a Sinophone mentality—a longing for and obsession with a cultural China that they imagine. Since the glory of the Han civilization and the Han people’s sense of superiority lay the foundation for Shih’s notion of Sinophone, the diasporic consciousness that these *waishengren* in Taiwan have partially caused their Sinophone sentiments. Meanwhile, as I will argue in chapter one, the overseas Chinese students’ obsession with a cultural China as discussed by Tu Weiming is both a cause of and cure for their homesickness. Therefore, their Sinophone mentality, presented in the case of *waishengren* in the 1960s and 1970s as an obsession with Han Chineseness and Mainland China, correlates with their longing to reclaim Nationalist China and Chineseness. Shih points out that the notion of Sinophone “can be a site of both a longing for and rejection of various constructions of Chineseness.” Therefore rather than undermining the concept of diaspora as Shih claims, Sinophone actually reinforces it.

The second emphasis of Chinese diasporic studies mentioned above, the difficulties diasporic Chinese experience while assimilating into local cultures or establishing local identities in their adopted land, will be the focus of the subsequent chapters of this dissertation. Highlighting the hardship of immigrants’ diasporic journeys does not deny what Shih’s notion of Sinophone advocates—Chinese immigrants’ rights to become local citizens and to create a

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54 See footnote no. 46.

localized culture. More specifically, Sinophone studies is “constantly engaged with local revisions and reinventions of Chineseness in relation to local languages and cultures.”\(^{56}\) This sentence from “Issues and Controversies,” the initial discussion in Shih’s *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader* (2013), clearly shows that Sinophone studies is not an exclusionary approach to Chineseness, but rather a new way to reconceptualize Chineseness and diaspora. In the same work, Shih also points out Sinophone studies’ contribution—highlighting the complex dynamics of roots and routes (borrowing cultural anthropologist James Clifford’s terms).\(^{57}\) Shu-mei Shih points out that “Sinophone studies allows us to rethink the relationship between roots and routes by considering the conceptions of roots as place-based rather than ancestral or routes.”\(^{58}\) In other words, Sinophone theory seeks optimistic paths for the diasporic Chinese population, and explains their ability to settle down in a foreign land.

The idea of roots as based on place rather than ancestry is not new. In Chinese American and Chinese diaspora studies there have been numerous discussions on the trajectory from *luoye guigen* 落葉歸根 (“when leaves fall they return to the root”) to *luodi shenggen* 落地生根 (“putting down roots where one lands”).\(^ {59}\) The latter notion implies that roots can be grown in a new land wherever diasporic subjects settle. Both emergent Chinese diasporic discourse and Sinophone studies embrace the idea of a mobile rootedness—that immigrants can take root in the places to which they emigrate. Particularly important is the process of up-rooting from their

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56 See her “Issues and Controversies,” in *Sinophone Studies*, 18.
57 Ibid., 19.
58 See her “Against Diaspora,” 38.
59 Sau-ling C. Wong has introduced these two terms as proof of genocentrism and racinationism in the theorization of the Chinese diaspora. “Genocentrism posits the meaning of life in diaspora primarily if not exclusively in terms of relationship to origin.” “Racinationism is premised on the possibility of creating a new home in the land of settlement after dislocation from the homeland.” See her “Global Vision and Locatedness: World Literature in Chinese/by Chinese from a Chinese-Americanist Perspective,” in *Global Chinese Literature*, 56–57.
homeland to re-rooting in a new land. My project hopes to capture precisely this process through studying the changing notion of “home.” “Home” here is not limited to a geographical and political homeland. Instead, “home” in my project primarily refers to the emotive constructs through which diasporic subjects experience a sense of belonging, no matter whether to a place, a political regime, a culture, or a personal relationship.

Similarly, the notion of “routes” that developed in postmodern diasporic discourse shows a striking similarity to Sinophone studies. Postmodern diasporic discourse departs from the emphasis on homelessness and homesickness of previous diasporic discourse, and celebrates, rather than laments, identities on-the-move. Meanwhile, Sinophone emphasizes the positivity of routes by seeing it as “a more mobile conception of home-ness rather than wandering and homelessness.” The “home” in this quote is conceptualized as a flexible and dynamic space where diasporic population’s new sense of identity and belonging is anchored. Shih goes further to argue that routes can become roots. It is too far-fetched to combine “roots” and “routes” in one, despite the interconnected relationship between the two. In other words, roots are still the dots on the map and routes are still the lines that connect them. The routes are the trajectory that the Chinese diasporic population travels, while roots are wherever they settle down and affiliate with the local cultures as well as the physical locales. Therefore, it is important to note both the differences and correlations between roots and routes.

On one’s diasporic journey, especially in the world of globalization today, “roots” and “routes” are no longer fixed. “Roots” are established in multiple locales along routes, and routes are generated in multi-directional dimensions. For instance, Chinese Americans who travel back

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60 See her “Against Diaspora,” 38.

61 Ibid.
and forth could have different roots on their journey from China to America, and vice versa. Meanwhile their routes would be back and forth, direct or detoured. My dissertation hopes to contribute to the understanding of these constantly shifting dynamics of roots and routes. In the shifting mechanisms between them, diasporic subjects have to constantly seek a new subjectivity (self) in relation to those changing networks. “Home,” as a sense of belonging, is shaped by diasporic subjects’ forever changing subjectivity in relation to their multiple roots and diasporic routes. Therefore, to study the notion of “home” is to study diasporic subjects’ formation on their diasporic routes. The “home” I envision is not limited to actual spaces that one identifies as home—a geographical locale or space, (whether family, nation, or a body)—but also homelessness, homesickness and at-homeness.

The current criticisms of “home” in diaspora and Sinophone studies do not sufficiently address the complexity demonstrated in diasporic Chinese literature. They fail to critique the very process by which “home” and “diaspora” are re-defined and re-imagined by Sinophone and Anglophone diasporic writers. By studying contemporary Chinese immigrant writings, I intend to debunk the concept of “home” not only from outside but from inside. My definition of “home” is informed but not limited to the root/route paradigm. I posit not only a routed identity but also a decentered, deterritorialized identity. I assert that studying the construction of “home” in Chinese diasporic literature will contribute to our understanding of the mapping of diasporic literature and national literature. My project examining “home” in diasporic Chinese writings bridges Chinese diaspora and Sinophone studies and further highlights the heterogeneity and complexity of the notion of “home.”

My first chapter reexamines the notion of home and homesickness in overseas Chinese student literature during the 1960s and 1970s. Overseas Chinese student writers, active during
the 1950s to 1970s, are *waishengren*, people who, for political and cultural reasons beyond their control, were moved from Mainland China to Taiwan while young. They struggle to define themselves as Chinese or Taiwanese because of their experience of the anti-Japanese war, Civil War and exile. Through the theoretical framework of Sinophone Studies and the notion of “obsession with China,” I demonstrate that the idealized homeland in their mind—the cultural and historical China, with which they had hardly any real experience, becomes an object of their obsession. This diasporic yearning for the lost cultural center of Han civilization becomes both a cause and cure for their homesickness in Taiwan. This chapter problematizes Shih’s claims about the localized identity of Sinophone subjects, as these *waishengren* carry with them memories of an imaginary home that no longer exists, memories that interfere with any process of localization.

Chapter 2 discusses Chinese American writer Yan Geling’s two “Scar Literature” novels, *The Criminal Lu Yanshi* (*Lufan Yanshi* 陸犯焉識, 2011) and *A Woman’s Epic* (*Yige nüren de shishi* 一個女人的史詩, 2006). It examines how individuals sustain and re-establish their sense of home through love, marriage and family when a disrupted political regime and destroyed homeland force intellectuals into exile. Instead of defining “home” in relation to national identity, “home” in Yan’s works straddles Communist collectives and individuals, and reveals how personal relationships respond to the nation-building project. Yan’s novels question the role of the nation as the sole source of defining “home”; in fact, the nation disrupts the formation of home in the Mao era because the political regime works against the personal feelings essential to a foundation of “home.”

Chapter 3 fills a gap in scholarship on overseas students’ writings by discussing the personal and affective experience in some less-known contemporary overseas Chinese student
writings including *New York Lover* (*Niuyue qingren* 紐約情人, 2004), *Listen to the Caged Bird Sing* (*Wang duan nanfeiyen* 望斷南飛雁, 2010), and *Notes of a Couple* (*Fuqi biji* 夫妻筆記, 2004). Love, in these novels, becomes a mechanism for diasporic subjects to constitute their identities and to conjure up a sense of “home” from their experience. The experience of deracination and alienation that migratory subjects experience is paralleled in both their romantic relationships and their experience as Chinese immigrants. Compared to early overseas Chinese student writings, these narratives are more personalized and romanticized: while the sense of home in early writings is more informed by national identification, contemporary, cosmopolitan, free-spirited subjects define their sense of home and identities through their affectionate relationships and attachments. The chapter attempts to recover these works that have mistakenly been overlooked in diasporic Chinese literature.

Chapter 4, on renowned Chinese-American writer Ha Jin, challenges the existing view in diasporic studies — that home and identity are formed *en route*. Situating the texts in diasporic discourse, I show that to Chinese immigrants, the old world (China) and the new world (America) are pushing and pulling diaspora constantly, forcing them to be always en route between the two. Their home, therefore, is constituted in the conflicts between the two worlds. However, in both of his immigrant novels *A Free Life* (2007) and *A Map of Betrayal* (2014), the Chinese diaspora’s fantasy of inhabiting multiple homes and identities has collapsed. The characters in the novel typify paradoxes and contradictions: they both embody multiple identities and deny that such a thing is possible; that is, they are at once diasporic while also denying a diasporic point of view. They resist both definition and being defined.
Chapter One

Homesickness and Home-sickness in Overseas Student Writings — A Study of Writings by Yu Lihua and Pai Hsien-yung

“Mou T’ien-lei is a Rootless Man because, cut off and unfulfilled, he has been transplanted from his motherland before his cultural heritage could come to full personal fruition… The wandering Chinese has become a spiritual exile: Taiwan and the motherland are incommensurable. He has to move on. Like Ulysses, he sets out on a journey across the ocean, but it is an endless journey, dark and without hope. The Rootless Man, therefore, is destined to become a perpetual wanderer.”


1. A Different “Obsession with China”

Pai Hsien-yung, a well-known writer of Chinese exile literature, coined the terms “rootless man” and “wandering Chinese” to describe overseas students such as Mou Tianlei in Yu Lihua’s *Again the Palm Trees, Again the Palm Trees* (*Youjian zonglü*, *youjian zonglü* 又見棕櫚，又見棕櫚), who have lost their sense of self. Overseas Chinese student literature during the 1960s and 1970s often portrays the overseas Chinese who live in Taiwan or in the United States in a negative light—homeless, alienated, displaced, and abandoned.¹ Some scholars emphasize these negative feelings in the “rootless generation” and argue that overseas Chinese students’

writings should really be considered part of the ethnocentric project that highlights the hardship of immigrants. These critics target the overseas Chinese writers’ unfair portrayals of the overseas Chinese students, and cast doubt on their “homesickness,” claiming that it is a performative, feigned act. For instance, Marlon K. Hom critiques Chinese immigrant writers’ ethnocentrism and their limited understanding of what is American. Chinese immigrant writers, to him, focus too much on their own diasporic consciousness while having a narrow view of American-born Chinese.² Sheng-mei Ma argues that immigrant and minority writers have contradictory feelings; they are “nostalgic for China while eagerly Westernizing themselves, busily putting down roots on American soil yet apathetic to their own marginalized status.”³ He thus criticizes overseas student writers for being assimilationists and elitists.⁴ Subsequently, Xiao-huang Yin, in his *Chinese American Literature since the 1850s* (2000), also points out the elitist status of the Chinese immigrant student writers whose writings are largely shaped by academic settings.⁵

These scholars seem to be frustrated that these overseas student writers as privileged offspring of the Republic of China citizens do not recognize their own privileges, which include special favor in Taiwan and the chance to study abroad, while lamenting their hardships. While these scholars rightly point out their elite intellectual status, they have ignored other elements of

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⁴ His article, “Immigrant Subjectivities and Desires in Overseas Student Literature: Chinese, Postcolonial, or Minority Text?” *Positions: East Asia cultures critique* 4:3 (Winter 1996), examines Yu Lihua’s *Again the Palm Trees, Again the Palm Trees*, and he argues that Mou’s view of his homeland is problematic since it is born from his elite high-class status and it speaks more about his bourgeois condition.

the backgrounds of these overseas writers. Most of these writers from Taiwan are waishengren,\(^6\) or Chinese mainlanders who arrived from Mainland China while still quite young. Waishengren refers to those mainlanders coming to Taiwan during and after the Chinese Civil War from 1945 to 1949; Benshengren 本省人, on the other hand, means mainlanders whose ancestors arrived before the Japanese colonized Taiwan in 1895, some of whom came centuries earlier. Some of the waishengren later came to the United States and therefore they are also called overseas Chinese students (liuxuesheng 留學生), with “liu” meaning remaining or having never left. They did not choose to go to Taiwan, but came with their families for political and cultural reasons, which they had no control over. The experience of Civil War and their exile experience helped to develop their identification straddle between China and Taiwan.

Besides, previous scholars were overly concerned about whether or not these overseas student writers’ representation of their homeland is authentic or not and whether they have the right to lament the hardships of the general immigrant population, even though they themselves may not share those hardships. Such readings focus therefore on the authenticity of their representation of both their homelands (Taiwan/China) and of overseas Chinese; by doing so however repeats the mistake of Chinese American studies.\(^7\) Their portrayals should not be judged via a dichotomy of accurate or inaccurate, right or wrong, but rather should be viewed as articulating a hybrid identity that resists fixedness and stability. This chapter examines the unsettling narratives of waishengren’s identity and waishengren’s relationship with benshengren.

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\(^6\) I use “waishengren” in this chapter to refer to Chinese coming from Mainland to Taiwan after 1945, distinctive from native Taiwanese. This term has been commonly used, though it is sensitive and controversial. For more see Hou Ruqi, Shuangxiang zhijian 雙鄉之間 [Between two homelands] (Taipei: Linking, 2014), 43–45.

\(^7\) Earlier Chinese American criticism has largely focused on whether a given writer represents China authentically or not. See for instance Frank Chin’s strident criticisms of Maxine Hong Kingston and others for not authentically portraying China. For details see Frank Chin, et al. The Big Aiiieee! (New York: Plume, 1991).
in overseas Chinese student writings by Yu Lihua and Pai Hsien-yung. In post-WWII Taiwan, the Nationalist government attempted to stabilize their regime partially by imposing a strong national identity, which I will explain later. If “home” is a space to articulate this new identity in the land they emigrated to, the characters in this chapter destabilize the national identity by leaving “home”—their country and family—while maintaining a connection and obsession with the “home” they have left. Their act of migration, broadly defined through transcending geographical, cultural, and psychological boundaries, generates a diasporic narration that involves a zigzag trajectory. It manifests an unstable subjectivity that responds to the calls of “stability” and “nationalism” under the Nationalist regime in Post-War Taiwan. These waishengren’s homesickness is largely due to their identity crisis, their cultural vulnerability, and their obsession with cultural superiority.

October 25, 1945, celebrated as Retrocession Day, marked the moment that Taiwan returned to be a part of the Republic of China. When Chiang Kai-shek lost the Civil War to Mao Zedong in 1949, Chiang led his Nationalist government and two million military personnel and civilians to retreat to Taiwan. Chiang did not intend to stay in Taiwan for long. To the Nationalist government, Taiwan was only a base where they could recuperate military power and from which they would one day reclaim Mainland China. The Nationalists described Mainland China as dalu (Mainland 大陸), as their motherland.8 Their goal had always been to redeem the mainland, and to “extinguish the all-evil Communist bandits and rescue mainland brothers [xiaomie wan’e gongfei, jiejiu dalu tongbao 消滅萬惡共匪，解救大陸同胞].”9 Therefore in the

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8 For further discussion on the term dalu and its political implications, see Hui-Ching Chang and Richard Holt, “The mainland (dalu, 大陸)—the nostalgic never-land,” in Language, Politics and Identity in Taiwan: Naming China (New York: Routledge, 2015), 86–136.

9 Ibid., 90.
1950s and 1960s, Mainland China became the imagined “native soil on paper” (*zhishang xiangtu* 紙上鄉土), in David Der-wei Wang’s words. This China-oriented discourse created by the Nationalist government fed an obsession with a triumphal return to an increasingly imaginary homeland.

While aiming to redeem Mainland China, the Nationalist government also built a strong nationalist consciousness in Taiwan. For example, according to Christopher Hughes the Nationalist government imposed Mandarin as the standard “National Language” (*Guoyu* 國語). Leading Japanese-language newspapers were replaced by *The Central Daily* (*Zhongyang ribo* 中央日報), *The United Daily News* (*Lianhe bao* 聯合報), *China Times* (*Chongguo shibao* 中國時報), *National Language Daily* (*Guoyu ribao* 國語日報) and others. At the same time, they decreed that the calendars would reset, counting 1912 as year one, to commemorate the founding of the Republic of China. A number of streets were renamed after locations in Mainland China. The Nationalist government’s strategy to nationalize Taiwan was, in Lingchei Letty Chen’s words, “internal colonization.” This internal colonization started with the ROC’s policy of cultural homogeneity and monopoly of power after its retreat to Taiwan in 1949.

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But unlike the external colonization by Japan, I argue, the Nationalist government’s extravagant attempt to recreate a “Cultural China” in Taiwan shows a cultural vulnerability—anxieties about being unable to wrest Mainland China back from the Communists caused them to remap an alternative Mainland China onto Taiwan. The Nationalist government’s reliance on American economic and military support further shows their cultural vulnerability. During the Cold War, the Sino-American Mutual Defense Treaty was signed between the United States and the Republic of China in order to secure Taiwan from invasion by the PRC during the period 1955–1979. Because of the close political ties between America and Taiwan, a number of Taiwanese found themselves with easy access to American culture and with an ideal destination that might allow them to escape their conflicted identity. Although *waishengren* and *benshengren* had a shared desire to go to the United States, *waishengren* did so more often because of their alienation in both Mainland China and Taiwan. And because they had privileged access to the sort of education—in Taipei—needed to prepare them for study abroad. The Overseas Chinese student writers often portray nostalgia for Mainland China and their homesickness in their exile. Pai Hsien-yung, for instance, is most known for his nostalgic characters in *Taipei People*. While the homesickness of his *waishengren* characters is obvious, the political and cultural reasons that cause the homesickness are complex. Besides experiencing Chinese Civil War and exile, the *waishengren* are overly obsessed with their homeland China. Adopting Shu-mei Shih’s concept of Sinophone and C. T. Hsia’s notion of “obsession with China,” I would call *waishengren’s* mentality in post-War Taiwan “Sinophone obsession with China,” meaning the Sinophone subjects’ obsession with an idea of their own cultural superiority.
This imperial unconsciousness of Chinese civilization proposed by Sinophone studies provides a new framework through which to understand the diasporic consciousness of Chinese outside Mainland China. A good example is Pai Hsien-yung. His short story “Winter Nights” depicts two professors, former May Fourth intellectuals, talking about their lives. One a specialist on Byron and the other an ancient Chinese history professor at Berkeley find themselves exhausted after fifty years. Both of them lament the loss of their glory days when they were considered intellectual and political heroes on Mainland China during the May Fourth period. The Berkeley professor of Chinese history suffers from repeatedly seeing his motherland’s glorious past being misunderstood and despised in America. When an American student from Harvard University strongly criticized May Fourth intellectuals for their blind faith in Western culture, democracy and science, as well as their betrayal of China’s Confucianism, the Chinese professor feels his personal glory in engaging in the May Fourth New Culture movement was being attacked by the student. In order to preserve the glorious image of China in his mind, he gives up teaching the history of Republican China and sticks to teaching and writing about the history of Tang China. He retreats from his anti-imperialist personal beliefs during the Republic period (1911–1949) back into the time when China was a growing and powerful empire.

The obsession with China here is with a time when Chinese culture was glorious and the political regime successful. I distinguish my concept from C. T. Hsia’s notion of “obsession with China,”13 which he uses to critique Chinese modernist writers’ preoccupation with depicting the malaise in the nation. In an interview, David Der-wei Wang explains Hsia’s term and article as a

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The “obsession with China” seemed to be carried on generation after generation. However, while the modernist writers C. T. Hsia criticizes are mainly obsessed with the China as an object of salvation, the \textit{waishengren} in Taiwan are no longer obsessed with removing its humiliation, ugliness, and weakness. Rather, they are obsessed with an ideal, glorious cultural China that has long since disappeared in the mists of history. With that glorious cultural China in mind, the \textit{waishengren} assumed an attitude of social and cultural superiority after the great divide in 1949.\footnote{Rosemary Haddon notes \textit{waishengren}’s political and cultural supremacy in her discussion of Zhu Tianwen’s works. See Rosemary Hodden, “Being/Not Being at Home in the Writing of Zhu Tianxin,” in \textit{Cultural, Ethnic, and Political Nationalism in Contemporary Taiwan}, ed. John Makeham and A-chin Hsiau (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 107.} It is this Sinophone obsession with China that drove the Nationalist government to recreate a cultural China to force “stability” and “nationalism” on Post-War Taiwan. Therefore, \textit{waishengren} who were exiled from Mainland China to Taiwan conjured up a “home” that was largely based on their imaginary homeland and the idealized Nationalist regime. Yet this obsession with an idealized homeland and regime is “sick,” because the restrictive Nationalist control in Taiwan initially caused unrest and riots, typified by the February 28 Incident and the White Terror.\footnote{The February 28 Incident, also known as the 2.28 Incident in 1947, is one of the most tragic events in modern Taiwan history. It marked the beginning of the White Terror when tens of thousands of Taiwanese were killed. The official report published not that long ago saw these numbers as inflated. Thousands, perhaps; not tens of thousands, and mainlanders were killed by Taiwanese as well, but in smaller numbers of course.} The \textit{waishengren}’s longing and displacement is caused mainly by interactions and conflicts between \textit{waishengren} and \textit{benshengren} in post-1949 Taiwan society, as well as the
Nationalists government’s obsession with its past glory on Mainland China. I use the term “Sinophone obsession with China” to allude to the cultural superiority that waishengren claimed in Taiwan.

At the same time the Sinophone obsession with China hinders waishengren from truly embracing the Taiwan culture as it existed prior to their arrival. For instance, in the world of Pai Hsien-yung’s Sinophone subjects, Mainland China and China’s imperial past becomes the source of nostalgia, and this nostalgia interferes with many of the Sinophone subjects’ ability to accept the present reality. In his “On the Margins of the Chinese Discourse,” Leo Ou-fan Lee argues that Chinese exiles’ obsession with their homeland hinders them from enjoying the “privilege of being truly on the periphery” since they do not retain a sufficient distance from the center. The idealized homeland in the waishengren’s mind—the cultural center of historic China, with which they had hardly any real experience—delays their assimilation and forms the core of an “imaginary nostalgia,” in David Der-wei Wang’s words. The overseas Chinese writers and characters discussed in this chapter have long been away from the China that is now under Communist rule. Despite their obsession with cultural China, these waishengren have experienced traumatic histories: the Japanese invasion, the internal Civil War, and then exile in Taiwan. As children exiled with their parents from Mainland China, these writers’ mediated memories are partially of a land that they cannot actively remember and certainly cannot return.

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18 David Wang’s notion of “imaginary nostalgia,” characterized not by retrieving the past but by creating an imaginary past on behalf of the present. Wang argues it “refers us to the intra- and intertextual dynamics that configures the yearning for home.” See his Fictional Realism in 20th-Century China: Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 253.
19 Since the 1950s the themes of war and exile constantly appeared in literature. An example of this is Lan Yu Hei (1958) by Wang Lan, which narrates a love story during war time, from the anti-Japanese war to the government of the Republic of China moving to Taiwan.
to; as a result, they do not feel “at home” in Taiwan. They are rootless, to a much greater extent than their parents. Therefore overseas Chinese’s homesickness/homelessness is partly because of the inauthenticity or incompleteness of any sense of home on the Mainland, but also in part because of their Sinophone obsession with that lost home.

There are two kinds of sickness here: homesickness, meaning waishengren’s sense of displacement and alienation; and home-sickness—waishengren’s identity crisis and their “sick” notion of home. In both cases, the “home” is already deconstructed; rather than an actual geographical locale, it is an idealized political entity and cultural identity that these overseas Chinese student writers and their characters imagine. In the following I will examine both homesickness and home-sickness in Yu Lihua and Pai Hsienyung’s works. Through granting the protagonist an “outsider-within” position, in the society and the body respectively, Yu Lihua’s Again the Palm Trees, Again the Palm Trees identifies and embodies the sickness of the societies the waishengren live in. Two stories from Pai Hsien-yung’s Taipei People discussed in this chapter, “Glory’s by Blossom Bridge” (Huaqiao rongji 花橋榮記) and “Winter Nights,” (Dongye 冬夜) demonstrate a Sinophone writer’s obsession with the cultural center of China as the cause of home-sickness.

2. Spectator of Sickness – Mou Tianlei in Again the Palm Trees, Again the Palm Trees

20 As termed by sociologist Patricia Hill Collins, “outsider within” refers to “social locations or border spaces occupied by groups of unequal power.” See her Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1998), 5. This term not only indicates membership position but also a power/knowledge relationship as fits the discussion here.
Yu Lihua is one of the leading representative writers of overseas student literature and was often known as a spokesperson for Chinese intellectuals in the United States. She actually made her entry into the American literary scene, however, with an English-language story called “The Sorrow at the End of Yangtze River.” After this story won the prestigious Samuel Goldwyn Creative Writing Award, she could not bear the increased attention from American publishers: “They [mainstream publishers] were only interested in stories that fit the pattern of ‘Oriental exoticism’—the feet-binding of women and the addiction of opium-smoking men.” Yu resisted this call to self-Orientalizing, and from that point on wrote in Chinese, which enabled her to “hold on to ‘roots,’ and her original self.”

In her extensive research on Yu Lihua’s works, Hsin-sheng C. Kao summarizes the various stages of her career: in the earliest stage from the [19]60s to the early [19]70s she mainly established the “rootless generation” which she is most famous for; in her second stage she focused on female personae and the theme of “searching for roots”; in the last phase since the late [19]80s her works examine different problems associated with “returning” or “homecoming” and “awakening.”

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21 Yu Lihua dislikes her writings only being associated with overseas students. See Yu Lihua, Ren zai lütu 人在旅途 [People on journey] (Jiangsu: Jiangsu wenyi chubanshe, 2000), 334.
22 “Sorrow at the End of the Yangtze River” was written in English and published in UCLA Review (March 1957): 1–13.
23 In Again the Palm Trees, Tianlei says similar things, probably rendering Yu’s own experiences, “To enter the American literary scene? Unless you write novels about long braids and foot binding, or hiding ten thousands of American dollars into a briefcase…that dream would be broken” See Yu Lihua, Youjian zonglü, youjian zonglü 又見棕櫚, 又見棕櫚 [Again the palm trees, again the palm trees] (Taiwan: Huangguan chubanshe, 1967).
24 She says “I didn’t want to write that stuff. (she) wanted to write about the struggles of Chinese immigrants in American society.” qtd. in Werner Sollors, Multilingual America (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 179.
25 Yu Lihua, Ren zai lütu, 334.
Yu Lihua’s novel *Again the Palm Trees* tells the story of Mou Tianlei, an overseas Chinese student who spends ten years in the United States getting his degree in journalism and then returns home to visit his family in Taiwan. While there, he sees a girl he has been corresponding with for two years. During his return, he also witnesses the Americanization of Taiwan society and the Taiwanese craze for going to America. Particularly, a girl his parents arrange him to meet, Yishan, has a strong desire to go to the United States. Although everyone strongly encourages him to go back to the U.S., he wants to stay in Taiwan, even though the country’s changes disappoint him—Taiwan is no longer the place he remembers from his childhood, but one that is materialistic and Westernized. To make things worse, people wrongly view him as a representative of Western culture. The alienation and loneliness he feels in his homecoming visit disappoints him and does not alleviate the pain he felt in America, the pain that motivated his return in the first place.

*Again the Palm Trees* is known for portraying student-intellectual émigré and exile life, and critics often call it a representative work of émigré students’ alienation and hardship abroad. For readers familiar with modern Chinese literature, the “rootlessness” portrayed by overseas Chinese student writers, especially in *Again the Palm Trees*, might bring a sense of *déjà vu*, as this image resembles the pathetic male protagonist in Yu Dafu’s short story “Sinking.” In this story, a male Chinese student in Japan suffers from humiliation and hostility; as a result he isolates himself and indulges in sexual fantasies and masturbation. At the end of “Sinking,” the pathetic protagonist laments: “O China, my China, you are the cause of my death!”

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alienated exile in Japan, the protagonist in the end blames his motherland China for his own weakness and fragility.

Tianlei, the protagonist of *Again the Palm Trees*, after having been in America for ten years, loses the sense of belonging (“roots”) in either Taiwan or the United States. As he laments, “Once, Gertrude Stein told Hemingway that they were the ‘Lost Generation.’ In our case, for our generation, it probably should be called the ‘Rootless Generation.’” 28 Tianlei’s disillusionment and alienation echo the despondence of the male protagonist in “Sinking”:

“Again looking up, he saw a bright star trembling in the farthest reaches of the western horizon...Underneath that shaky star lies my country, my birthplace, where I have spent eighteen years of my life. But alas, my homeland, I shall see you no more!” 29 Both stories capture the inevitable homesickness the protagonists endure, and they both come to realize the homesickness strongly in their diasporic journey. To some extent Tianlei resembles Yu Dafu’s male character. Yet unlike Yu Dafu’s anonymous, impotent, and depressed protagonist, Mou Tianlei is quite powerful and gains his own agency. Tianlei’s role is a privileged intellectual observer and an active seeker of his own identity. Although alienated from both America and Taiwan, Tianlei makes his own choices—to return to Taiwan to search for his “roots,” to stay and serve his own country rather than returning to the U.S., to see if his relationship with his fiancé Yishan will work out and so on. Tianlei is both an alienated insider who grew up in Taiwan, and an informed outsider who, after 10 years abroad in the US, understands that the image that many Taiwanese students’ have of that country is an illusion. Fashioned as a witness of the Westernized society of

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Taiwan, Tianlei mourns for the loss of Zhonghua minguo (Republic of China) national identity.

Sheng-mei Ma argues that Tianlei’s critique of modern Taiwan reflects his own privileged social class more than reality. Ma’s observation of Tianlei’s privileged status and his subjective view of Taiwan may be true, but Tianlei’s critique is prejudiced largely not just because of his elite status but also because of his move from being a member of the elite class to being a diasporic, displaced person. In fact, his observation is shown to be uniquely different from other elite members of his family or friends in Taiwan who haven’t travelled abroad. By focusing on whether Tianlei has the right to make those critiques, Ma dismisses the significant meanings of the critiques themselves.

Through Tianlei’s eyes, readers are led to see Taiwan’s Westernized society: the Western clothes and manners, the American decoration of a popular ice cream shop, all of which demonstrate the extreme or politically expedient fanaticism the Taiwanese harbor towards the epitome of westernization, America. Standing in the position of an outsider within, Tianlei diagnoses this fanaticism as sick and unreasonable: “I don’t know why the Taiwan people think such good things about the United States; from intellectuals to laborers, all think it to be a happy land, not only rich but also peaceful, as if the world’s problems would all disappear once they got to America. What could they be thinking?” He comments, “I find people’s worship of

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31 Yu Lihua, *Youjian zonglü*, 69.
32 Ibid., 148.
33 Most people believed that the only thing preventing a PRC invasion was the US Navy nearby, and they were probably right (the PRC didn’t have a significant navy until just the last few years).
34 Yu Lihua, *Youjian zonglü*, 120. Critics of Yu Lihua’s works have repeatedly pointed out the theme—Taiwanese’s blind faith in the West presented in Yu’s work. Ma connects this with the fact that Mou Tianlei cannot understand
America is abnormal, as if everything would be good once branded with ‘America’,” and he sometimes expresses his discontent with sarcasm as in the following: “The American moon is more round than the Chinese one, and of course watermelon in the States is sweeter than in China!”

Typical among the characters, Tianlei’s fiancé, Yishan, is excessively obsessed with the future and the hopes she expects to realize once she gets to America. With her unabated desire to go to the United States, she embodies the Westernized Taiwan of the time. For Yishan, Tianlei represents the promise of a future and new life in the United States. When Tianlei proposes to live in Taiwan after the wedding, she strongly objects:

Disappointed, nervous and even scornful, ‘no, no’ she says, the ‘no’ in her eyes comes faster than her mouth. “If you want to marry me, take me to the United States immediately. I have been dreaming of going abroad for so many years. I cannot stand staying here, such a little place, these people, this small limited circle, I have been restricted here for more than ten years, you said you couldn’t breathe, but I am too bored here.”

Her love for Tianlei and their marriage are based on her romantic American Dream. Like other waishengren of that time, Yishan suffers from a loss of identity and engages in a constant search for escape. America becomes an idealized place to escape to, in the words of Tianlei’s sister Tianmei, “the time/place/environment.” America is their imagined remedy, an idealized utopia that could cure their homesickness. In the absence of their own national identities, people in Taiwan latch onto some things that America possibly provides—freedom, opportunity, and

people’s blindness, saying “Mou’s frustrated inability to comprehend this as a general social phenomenon signals a blindness that critics who analyze Yu Lihua’s work have simply repeated.” Ma, Subjectivities and Desires, 441.

35 Yu Lihua, Youjian zonglù, 145.
36 Ibid., 149.
37 Ibid., 340.
38 Ibid., 175.
education. Yet this search for physical and emotional escape in the United States demonstrates waishengren’s own insecurities in the nation and their shattered identities after the internal Civil War in China.39 After the Nationalist government led by Chiang Kai-shek retreated to Taiwan in 1949, Mainlanders like Tianlei’s family faced an identity crisis. Tianmei points out: “I often don’t feel myself belonging here, but only inhabiting here, and would go back to my hometown someday; although we came here at a young age, I don’t find ‘roots’ here.”40

While witnessing the sick mentality of his fellow waishengren in Taiwan, Tianlei becomes a center of attention in Taiwan because he represents Western culture. Yet people’s expectations of him drastically differ from who he is, and he therefore disappoints his family, friends and himself. In the novel, his old relatives, family and friends all look up to him as a doctoral graduate from the States. His family shows off his American experience and meddle with his potential marriage; all of this attention burdens him, and he becomes restless under their gaze. In Taiwan, Tianlei feels isolated, as if he were the only one who can see the sickness of the society. He believes that the Taiwanese people’s blind faith in the United States, and their inaccurate perception of overseas students agitate him.

Although Tianlei witnesses the drastic changes in Taiwan, he is not immune from them, but suffers from the very disease he is witnessing. Like so many others, Tianlei hopes for a better future when he first decides to go abroad. He writes a command on top of his desk, “Leave the country for a bright future” (Fuji quguo, qiancheng rujin 負笈去國，前程如錦). Though sick of his fellow waishengren’s America fanaticism, he sympathizes with them because he once shared

39 Previous scholars have pointed this out. Chih-ming Wang, for example, claims that Taiwanese’s craving for going abroad to study or settle down from late 1950s to 1970s became their escape from their displacement and fear. See his Writing Across the Pacific, 143.

40 Ibid., 176.
those same feelings. At a few times his critical view of Yishan’s Westernization is pointed back at him. He is both the subject and the object of this critical (self) gaze. His critique of Western modernity is self-conscious and self-reflective.

Instead of focusing on Tianlei’s diasporic experience in the United States, the novel depicts his homesickness in Taiwan after ten years’ experience in the United States. Because of his time away, and the way others look to him as an ambassador from Western culture, Tianlei becomes a kind of exotic other in Taiwan. Tormented by the Westernized Taiwanese society and the waishengren’s blind faith in America, Tianlei finds himself unable to accept the present. Instead, he occupies himself with the lost past.

Tianlei constructs his new identity through revisiting that past. Yet his past is no longer the “original” past anymore, but a past reconfigured by his experience of the present. In a preface to the novel, C. T. Hsia points out the co-existence of past, present and future in the novel. Things and people Tianlei comes across during this homecoming visit produce memories. In the first chapter of the novel, pictures hung chronologically on the wall of his room capture him at different times since he left Taiwan. His pictures on his earlier emigrant journey show his numerous hopes—the hope to go back to his homeland, as expressed in the song “Homeland.” Yet, his American life complicates his notion of home and blurs his memory of the homeland. Though reminded of his childhood in Taiwan, he now feels as if he is split, and lives “in two different worlds,” for his American life defamiliarizes him from his previous life in his hometown.

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41 C. T. Hsia, preface to Youjian zonglü, by Yu Lihua, 24.
42 Yu Lihua, Youjian zonglü, 55.
Once Tianlei visits Jinmen (an island off the southeastern coast of mainland China, occupied by Taiwan) and sees Xiamen (a city in southeastern Fujian, China), he reflects: “this is the land of our motherland, a land many people long for but don’t dare to return to! In the loneliness felt abroad, the loneliness of the ‘rootless generation,’ the motherland is already not a unified entity, but an abstract idea, a dream that is filled with sad but happy nostalgia.”

Tianlei’s thought summarizes the meaning of “home” and “root” in the diaspora’s mind—an abstract idea and an unreachable dreamland that sustains longing and nostalgia. Taiwan, which is supposed to pass along Chinese civilization and tradition under the rule of the Nationalists, fails to give the waishengren a real chance of reconnecting with their homeland.

Thinking of Tianlei as the representative of the “rootless” man perhaps fits into Shu-mei Shih’s notion of “root.” Root here does not refer to an ancestral locale, but a place to which one feels a sense of belonging. Tianlei’s return to Taiwan is not a return to his “ancestry,” but to a place tinged with Japanese and Western influences. However, his roots, which are regulated by his sense of obligation, belonging, and romance, do not provide him multiple homes; instead, they set him on a constant journey of wandering, a perpetual state of homelessness. He does not happily inhabit multiple homes, but feels homeless everywhere on his route. The state of homelessness (the negativity of home) creates a space of continuous longing and obsession that constitutes and is constitutive of the diasporic/Sinophone subject. Shih’s idea of “root” as a place is feasible: “root” could be a place someone identifies with; but for Tianlei the “root” is formulated in his diasporic experience, when he is away from Taiwan. Cai Yaxun has viewed the act of self-exile/diaspora in the 1960s overseas Taiwanese student literature as their authors’ way of “abandoning their homeland, seeking their selves and their sense of ‘root’ lost in their

43 Ibid., 250.
Diaspora as both a physical act and a mindset is a medium for them to establish their selves and their sense of “root” or rootedness. Tianlei is trying to figure his new self in the old place, meanwhile tracing his old self in a new place, but he never succeeds.

The spatial and temporal axes of Tianlei’s identity formulation are elaborated in Tianlei’s romantic relationships to three women in this novel: his fiancé Yishan; Meili, whom he dated before going to the States; and Jiali, a married woman he has an affair with in the United States. The narrator distinguishes Tianlei’s different relationships with them: “his love with Meili is romantic…the love between him and Yishan is purely artificial…the affair between him and Jiali is merely a most unforgettable momentary thing.”

“His feelings for Jiali are fascination and dependence, he likes Yishan and he has long loved Meili.”

Meili symbolizes Tianlei’s nostalgia for his romantic past. When he revisits his own room in Taiwan, he is constantly reminded of her. The events that happened between them are described in such vivid detail that they seem to be still fresh in Tianlei’s mind after ten years. Even little things like the mat in his room become reminders of their time together. Before Tianlei meets Meili all he thinks about is the woman he was with before he went to the United States. After he meets Meili again he sees changes in her: her face hasn’t changed much, but she is now a “modern young married woman.” Their emotional connection is driven away by reality and the distance that separated them. Just as Taiwan has changed, so too has Meili. Taiwan is no longer the country he once lived in; it can only remain as his nostalgic object. In

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44 Cai Yaxun, *Cong liuxuesheng dao yimin*, 154.
45 Yu Lihua, *Youjian zonglü*, 82-3.
46 Ibid., 293.
47 Ibid., 53.
48 Ibid., 292.
fact Taiwan was never realistic for him. When he was in Taiwan, he was always looking towards the future in America. He could have stayed in Taiwan and had a life with Meili; instead he left for a future he imagined would be better. But when he returns to Taiwan, his obsession with his past hinders him from accepting the changing reality.

And it hinders his connection with his current fiancé, Yishan, as well. As physically close as they are, mentally live in different times: Tianlei constantly dwells on the past and Yishan is obsessed with the future. Ironically Tianlei feels emotionally close to Yishan because she resembles his previous girlfriend in China and thus satisfies his imagination of his homeland; yet once he sees her in Taiwan he finds her “distant.”49 Their relationship is built on imaginary fantasies, for Tianlei of the past, for Yishan of the future, and both of them are absent from the present. There is hardly any instance in which they enjoy each other in the present moment. The present becomes nothing but a channel through which the conflicts of past and future are portrayed in their relationship. The present in the novel is fractured; the temporal axis between the past and future, the spatial axis between Taiwan and America—both are destabilized. Everybody is looking towards a time, or a place, that does not exist.

In contrast, Jiali’s maturity and shared diasporic experience give Tianlei a sense of comfort and security, yet the affair can never guarantee a future for him because she has a husband. The text compares the two women: “Hers is a completely different face than Yishan’s. Yishan’s face is shiny and bright like the sun, eye-catching. But this woman’s [Jiali’s] face is clouded. You feel like it exists, but you can’t follow it. It is light and soft, but also heavy. It does not shine but you can’t help exploring it—its color and shape. It gives people a sense of beauty,
one that is hard to analyze.”\textsuperscript{50} Just like the vague and pretty cloud in the quotation, Jiali symbolizes an unreachable ‘home’ in Tianlei’s migranthood—and the sense that he will never find a solid, rooted home in America.

Tianlei’s intricate relationships with the three women informs the temporal and spatial elements in the formulation of his identity: his old girlfriend has changed though she remains romanticized in his imagination; his new Taiwanese girlfriend is influenced by a strong Western fanaticism, unlike the traditional Taiwanese girl he imagines she would be; the married woman he has a passionate affair with is only a momentary emotional “home” in his migranthood, one that could not cure his homesickness. Haunted by his romantic thoughts of the imagined past and his disillusionment in America, Tianlei becomes a “perpetual wanderer” in Pai Hsien-yung’s words.

Sharing his loneliness is his college professor and mentor Mr. Qiu. If Tianlei represents the external diasporic subject who displays his nostalgia for his “good old days” in Taiwan, Qiu belongs to those internal ‘diasporic’ subject in Westernized Taiwan. To apply the term solastalgiato, which means “a form of psychic or existential distress caused by environmental change,”\textsuperscript{51} Qiu and other Taiwanese are victims of the Westernization of Taiwan. Unlike Tianlei, Qiu rejects an offer to teach Chinese at Stanford University but chooses instead to come back to Taiwan from the U.S. to teach literature. To persuade Tianlei to stay in Taiwan, Qiu proposes to edit a literary journal with him. One of his hopes is to publish “realistic works set in a foreign

\textsuperscript{50} Yu Lihua, Youjian Zonglü, 82.

\textsuperscript{51} Australian philosopher Glenn Albrecht coined the term solastalgiato. For details, see G. A. Albrecht, “Solastalgia: A New Concept in Human Health and Identity.” Philosophy, Activism, Nature 3 (2005): 41–55. Here I use it to signify the Westernized Taiwan which causes Tianlei and Qiu to be nostalgic for the past Taiwan.
background, in order to correct people’s inaccurate views of going abroad.” Qiu insists on both Taiwan and his messy little house as his home. He says: “Although messy and dirty, it is my nest, I feel the happiest and safest in this nest.” In describing his messy house, he also implies his view of Taiwan: no matter how disorganized Taiwan society is, he still identifies it as his home. As a returned patriot, Qiu is aware of Taiwan people’s unrealistic fantasy of America: “This is the distorted mindset of Taiwanese nowadays,” he criticizes, “old or young, men or women, all think the only promising path is to go to the United States.” He hopes to correct people’s thought through education, yet his wishful hope of educating the Taiwanese people about the West ends sadly with his death in an accident.

The tragic ending of his life shows that his insistence on holding on to traditional culture must yield to Westernization in the end. After the accident, his dead body is covered by a bed sheet with an American pattern sold in an American department store. Metaphorically, his old traditional Chinese body and spirits are obscured by an American commercial product. Mr. Qiu’s death symbolizes the degradation of traditional Chinese culture under the Nationalist rule and American influence.

Qiu’s death partially accounts for Tianlei’s disappointment and alienation in Taiwan, as Pai Hsien-yung points out: “Even Taiwan, supposedly the only bulwark of Confucian tradition, cannot offer him protection from his cultural vulnerability.” This cultural vulnerability, Hsin-sheng C. Kao explains, is “shared by an entire generation of young Chinese that were drifting

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52 Yu Lihua, Youjian Zonglut, 359.
53 Ibid., 220.
54 Ibid., 221.
55 Ibid., 356.
without any definite direction to guide them in their striving, goals, or fulfillment.”\textsuperscript{57} Therefore, Tianlei not only represents a generation of waishengren that experiences a loss of identity in Taiwan, but one that also experiences and witnesses the cultural vulnerability in Taiwan society during the 1960s.

3. “Obsession with China” as Cause of Sickness—Pai Hsien-yung and Taipei People

Pai Hsien-yung perhaps is the most famous among all overseas Chinese student writers of the 60s and 70s. He was born in 1937, the same year as the Marco Polo Bridge Incident and the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war. His father, Pai Chung-hsi, served as a general in the Nationalist government army, and retreated to Taiwan in 1951 with his family. Pai Hsien-yung experienced a difficult life during his youth: having been diagnosed with tuberculosis at the age of seven, and having been exiled—from Guangxi to Nanjing, Shanghai, Hong Kong, then to Taipei. Over the course of those difficulties, though, he developed an interest in literature. In 1960, Pai along with Leo Ou-fan Lee, Joseph S. M. Lau, and others who had all studied under T. A. Hsia, founded Modern Literature (Xiandai Wenxue 現代文學). Pai even sponsored the journal financially for a time. Pai is well known for both establishing this influential literary journal and for reviving the genre of Kun opera (Kunqu 崑曲) including making drastic revisions of the play Mudanting (The Peony Pavilion 牡丹亭) later in his life. In 1963 he came to the United States to join the Iowa International Writers program and then started to write stories about Chinese experiences in postwar America. Between 1965 and 1971 Pai wrote a series of

\textsuperscript{57} Kao Hsin-sheng C., “Yu Lihua’s Blueprint for the Development of a New Poetics,” 84.
fourteen stories, based on figures who went to Taiwan from the Mainland, *Taipei People* (*Taibei ren* 臺北人). All were published in *Xiandai Wenxue*. The collection was published in 1971 and was known for its fusion of literary Chinese and experimental modernist techniques.\(^{58}\) The short stories showcase characters with a wide range of backgrounds such as a dancer in “The Last Night of Taipan Chin,” generals and statesmen in “The Dirge of Liang Fu,” and scholars in “Winter Night.” This chapter will focus on two stories centered on overseas Chinese intellectuals, “Glory’s by Blossom Bridge,” and “Winter Night.”

Ouyang Zi, in her comprehensive study of *Taipei People, Wang Xie Tangqian de Yanzi* (王謝堂前的燕子), summarizes two commonalities of all the stories in the collection: first, the characters are all from Mainland China and have retreated to Taiwan after the defeat of Nationalist military in the Civil War; second, they all share a memorable past that they carry with them into their life in Taiwan.\(^\text{59}\) Their persistent memories of the glorious past indeed play a significant role in formulating their identities and constructs that “Sinophone obsession with China.” Although familiar with Taipei, Pai does not see it as his real home; nor is Kweilin: “In America I am particularly homesick. That is not a concrete ‘home,’ a house, a place, or anywhere—but these places, a composite of all memories related to China.”\(^\text{60}\) Therefore to Pai and the characters in his stories, “home” is often an abstract idea constructed by their emotional connections to their country of origin.


\(^{60}\) Ke Qingming, et al., eds., *Pai Hisen-yung yanjiu jingxuan* 白先勇研究精選 [Selected research on Pai Hsien-yung] (Taipei: Tianxia yuanjian chubanshe, 2008), 344.
By examining this notion of “home” and the “homesickness” of Mainlanders in Taiwan through “Glory’s by Blossom Bridge” (Huaqiao rongji) and “Winter Nights” (Dongye), we can ask: How are the notions of home and homesickness presented in the stories? How do the stories portray the characters’ obsession with China? How do waishengren and benshengren interact in the post-1949 society? And how do Sinophone theories help us understand this relationship?

“Glory’s by Blossom Bridge” is set around a restaurant in Taipei called “Glory,” named after the boss-lady’s grandfather’s restaurant in Kweilin. Unlike the famous restaurant in Kweilin, this shop barely sustains itself and has a number of Mainlanders who owe it money. One of the restaurant’s regular customers, Mr. Lu, is polite and intelligent and wins the boss-lady’s favor. Just when the boss-lady wants to match him up with her niece, however, she finds out Mr. Lu is already engaged. In fact, Mr. Lu has recently sent his brother ten gold bars in the hopes of getting his fiancé out of the Mainland. His brother, however, steals his money, and Mr. Lu must recognize that he will not be reuniting with his fiancée. Following this setback, he indulges in a sexual relationship with a lower-class laundry woman, Ah Chun, who is native Taiwanese. Over the course of this abusive, uneven relationship with Ah Chun, Mr. Lu finally dies, from causes unknown but another character Mrs. Ku calls it “heart failure.”

Mr. Lu is a tragic figure: he turns from a polite, gentle intellectual into an impatient, angry person. Unlike the other customers in the restaurant, who are mostly rude and uneducated, Mr. Lu is an educated gentleman, a Chinese teacher at the Changchun Elementary School for years. The boss-lady’s description of him in their first encounter shows his delicacy: “Mr. Lu was a thin fellow, kind of tall, and a little stooped. Had a pale face and a nose straight as a scallion. He looked old for his age, and bit run-down. His hair had turned gray early, and whenever he smiled you could spot a whole bunch of crow's feet at the corners of his eyes, but
underneath it all you could still see the outlines of what must have been a handsome face at one
time."  

This description highlights his maturity as well as fatigue, as if he had been worn out in
Taipei over the years. In the beginning of the story, Mr. Lu displays a great degree of patience,
especially with his students. The boss-lady observes, "(W)henever I saw the patient way he had
with his pupils, it always made me think of a gentle rooster I used to have…Many’s the time I
would see him spread his wings way out and shelter a whole flock of them underneath." By the
end of the story, his patience dissipates as his disappointment with life builds. In an echo of that
early scene, he leads a group of kids just let out of school. Yet, annoyed with their jabbering and
horsing around, he turns and shouts at them. The narrator describes Mr. Lu’s anger and
frustration, “you could tell he was mad as hell; his face turned absolutely purple, his neck was all
red, and the veins in his forehead seemed about ready to burst.” Such extreme anger and
explosions betray his impatience and lack of tolerance. When a girl giggles after this incident, he
feels as if the girl is laughing at him, and later slaps her face. When Mr. Lu dies, the coroner
attributes the cause of death to “heart failure,” symbolizing the sickness accumulated in his heart.

The changes in Mr. Lu’s personality are mainly caused by his relationships, including
both his broken relationship with his fiancée in China and his unequal relationship with the
Taiwanese laundry woman, Ah Chun. Liu’s relationship with his fiancé follows the traditional
Chinese view of family—they grew up together, were schoolmates and came from similar
backgrounds, and they had planned to marry before he left for the U.S.. His persistent longing for
their relationship and his hope for their reunion cast him as a traditional Chinese man who hopes

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61 Pai Hsien-yung, *Taipei People*, trans. Pai Hsien-yung and Patia Yasin (HK: Chinese University of Hong Kong
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid., 288.
to establish a family and provide his wife with security. For a long time, Mr. Lu yearns for her to come to Taiwan. Her coming to Taiwan would fulfill his wish to return to his homeland, in the form of their married life together. Yet this dream is destroyed by his brother's lies; his brother steals all his savings by lying to him, claiming that the money would get his fiancée across the border. The pure, trusting and hopeful Mr. Lu is forced to face a cruel reality— an untrustworthy Chinese society in which people prey on even family and friends. No matter how he holds onto the past, he is betrayed and abandoned by it. Disillusioned, Mr. Lu replaces his identification with and longing for his homeland and memories with his sexual desires. Unable to reclaim his happy past life with his fiancée, Mr. Lu attempts to regain his masculinity through his sexual relationship with Ah Chun.

That relationship portrays a power shift in the relationship between China and Taiwan, between man and woman. Mr. Lu represents an educated intellectual in Mainland China, a man of patriarchal tradition, the inheritor of a glorious past. Mr. Lu came from a wealthy family and his grandfather was a famous philanthropist in Kwelin [Guilin]. Yet in his relationship with Ah Chun he is reduced to an objectified victim. In contrast, Ah Chun, portrayed as a lower class native Taiwanese with little talent beyond seducing men, controls their relationship. Yet as Mr. Lu earlier released his suppressed anger, he now does the same with his sexual desire, acting on it impulsively with Ah Chun. As Ms. Gu observes, “The pair of them, stark naked in broad daylight! That damn piece was riding on top of Mr. Lu, her hair flying all over the place, she looked just like a lioness.” In calling Ah Chun a “lioness,” Mrs. Gu emphasizes her animal-like lust that threatens the Han-Chinese male. The picture of Ah Chun riding on top of Mr. Lu further

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64 Ibid., 268.
65 Ibid., 284.
shows her domination of him. Mr. Lu becomes her sexual object, which reverses the traditional view of gender roles in sexual activities.

The boss-lady observes the couple walking down the street, and provides a description that emphasizes the power imbalance further: “the woman in the lead. She had her head stuck way up in the air and that big bust of hers sticking out. She was wearing real flashy clothes, had a big splash of bright red rouge on each cheek—even her toenails were painted. She went strutting down the street in full sail, her wooden clogs pounding clip pity-clop. Mr. Lu followed along behind her, carrying a shopping basket.” We see a contrast here between Ah Chun’s princess-like pride and Mr. Lu’s servant-like disposition. Shih’s concept of Sinophone establishes China as “the self,” a colonial master, and the other ethnic Chinese as “Other.” Theoretically Mr. Lu would be cast as the colonial master in terms of his Han Chinese background and the socio-economic class of his family, yet the relationship between Mr. Lu and Ah Chun reverses this power dynamic.

As the title of the collection *Taipei People* suggests, the relationship between Mr. Lu and Ah Chun questions who are indeed the Taipei people: the benshengren who live in Taipei/Taiwan, or the waishengren who try to settle there after China’s civil war? In Mr. Lu’s mind, his glorious past and his former relationship, once the center of his nostalgia, have collapsed. As a result, he tries to find a new life through his relationship with a Taiwanese woman, trying to re-root himself in the new society. The unexpectedness and tragedy of his death implicates his accumulated hidden mental sickness. In his relationship with Ah Chun, Mr. Lu becomes a “sick man,” a figure that often appears in Chinese literature in the early twentieth

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66 Ibid., 284–286.
century, as in Lu Xun and Yu Dafu’s stories, “Dong Ya bingfu (sick man of East Asia).”

Interestingly, unlike the “sick man of the East” at the turn of the century who is under the threat of imperialism, the “sick man” in this story, Mr. Lu, is marginalized not by imperial forces but by Taiwanese. The relationship between him and Ah Chun reserves the power dynamic between waishengren and Taiwanese in post-War Taiwan. In reality the mainlanders took over almost all big businesses, government positions, etc., dispossessing the Taiwanese people. Yet in this story, the Chinese Mainlander Mr. Lu is marginalized and objectified by a Taiwanese woman, and becomes weak and sick due to his loss of cultural superiority in Taiwan. The story, however, does not simply reverse this power dynamic.

In fact, the sickness and obsession with the past is not unique to Mr. Lu in the story. Other customers of Glory’s, Half-the-Town Li and Crazy Chin, also suffer from the deterioration of their lives in Taiwan compared to their lives in Mainland China. Half-the-Town-Li, who used to own half the houses in his hometown on Mainland China, now only cries over his losses and loneliness. He commits suicide the day after his seventieth birthday dying while he still owes the boss-lady food money. Crazy Chin, who used to be a magistrate in Junghsien [Rong xian] in Kwangsi [Guangxi] Province, is reduced to being a minor clerk in the government in Taipei. He harasses a female employee at work and gets fired. In the midst of such fallen circumstances, he retreats into pride in his life in China where he had two concubines. In Taiwan, his dominant patriarchal position is lost, and he is punished whenever he harasses women. In spite of this, or perhaps because of it, he is overly obsessed with his former position in China and still carries himself with arrogance in Taiwan: “he marched along the street, head cocked to one side and

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eyes all askew, waving his arms wildly in the air, foaming at the mouth and yelling, ‘Clear the road! Clear the road! His Honor the Magistrate is coming!’”68 His arrogance does not prevent him from a tragic ending—he drowns and is not found until people drain the ditch into which he fell. But the Board of Health does not even drain the ditch to look for Crazy Chin but simply fished up after they have decontaminated the area. The two characters’ deaths are shown to be even more pathetic because of their obsession with their positions in China.

The boss-lady, who serves as the first-person narrator in the story, shares the sickness as well. In her sympathetic tone she laments the glorious past of the restaurant her grandfather owned. The story opens with parallel descriptions of the two “Glory’s” restaurants, the one in Kweilin and its successor in Taipei. Replicating her grandfather’s Mainland business in Taiwan, on the one hand, shows her attempt to cling to her memories; on the other hand, it demonstrates her willingness to re-root herself in Taiwan. However she fails to recreate the same glamour for her new restaurant: “(b)ut this place called Glory’s by Blossom Bridge that I run now hasn’t got the old glamour.”69 The boss-lady, just like Mr. Lu and the others, is obsessed with the glorious past in her hometown. Kweilin in her eyes is like a heaven, with “green hills everywhere—your eyes’ll grow brighter just by looking at them—and blue waters—you wash in them and your complexion turns smooth and fair.”70 This is a romanticized home that does not exist in reality. Her entire narrative is framed by the past. The story opens and ends with her grandfather’s restaurant in Kweilin, both descriptions conveyed in a tone of pride: “there was nobody in all of Kweilin City who didn’t know about Grandpa Huang T’ienjung and his noodles... If you got

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69 Ibid., 260.
70 Ibid., 266.
there a little late you wouldn't get to eat any, because they'd be all sold out.”\(^{71}\) Hanging the picture of Blossom Bridge Mr. Lu leaves behind in her restaurant, the boss-lady says, “someday if anybody from Kwangsi comes along I’ll point to it and tell them that’s the Glory Noodle Shop by Blossom Bridge my Grandpa used to run back in Kweilin—right there at the crossroads by the head of the bridge, on the bank of the River Li.”\(^{72}\) The noodle shop’s name underscores her pride in past “Glory’s,” though that pride is of little use. While being a witness to Mr. Lu turning into a tragic, pathetic figure, the boss-lady shares a similar experience and feelings of homesickness and alienation. Yet this sense of homesickness and alienation seemingly incurable, and returning to the home of their imagination and nostalgia is impossible.

It is interesting that the author gives the boss-lady, an exiled Chinese in Taiwan, the authority to render her opinion of Mr. Lu’s situation. In her narration, the boss-lady sounds sympathetic towards Mr. Lu and hostile towards the native Taiwanese Ah Chun. Her description of Ah Chun reveals this: “That female had a pair of boobs on her would be bouncing off your face before she was close enough for you to make out who it was behind them. She wasn’t much over twenty and already that rump of hers was puffed out like a drum. When she was scrubbing clothes, there wasn't a single part of her body that didn’t jiggle; those big melons of hers would be going up and down like a pair of mallet-heads.”\(^{73}\) This description renders Ah Chun disgusting rather than elegant or sexy. The boss-lady’s depiction of Ah Chun’s sexual features reveals the Han Chinese’s view of native Taiwanese: the mainland Hans are superior, and the Taiwanese are reduced to objects of derision.

\(^{71}\) Ibid., 260.
\(^{72}\) Ibid., 292.
\(^{73}\) Ibid., 282.
Another story in *Taipei People*, “Winter Nights,” follows the theme of exiles who fled Mainland China to Taiwan. But it extends the boundaries of Chinese exiles from Taiwan to include the United States. Whether in Taiwan or in the United States, exiles running from Mainland China suffer from a loss of identity and displacement in the new society. This story narrates how two old friends, now both professors, reunite in Taipei after many years apart, talking about their careers and their glorious good old days when they were idealistic patriots. Yu Ch’in-lei, an expert on Byron who teaches literature in Taipei, is unhappy. He loses his passion for research and for the ideals of his nation. His college friend, Wu Chu-kuo, now a renowned professor of Chinese history at Berkeley, is invited to give a talk in Taiwan. Yet his fame does not make him happy, as he feels guilty for leaving Mainland China behind and is sad that he can’t defend his country when it is humiliated abroad. Despite their loneliness, displacement and alienation, what they most suffer from is the disappearance of the Chinese cultural center that they are obsessed with—the May Fourth movement in early 1920’s China in which they were proud and patriotic participants.

Just like “Glory’s by Blossom Bridge,” “Winter Nights” depicts Mainland Chinese who lament the loss of their glorious past. Professor Wu, the Professor of Chinese history at Berkeley, suffers from his motherland’s glorious past being misunderstood and despised. An American student from Harvard University strongly criticizes May Fourth intellectuals for their blind faith in Western culture, democracy and science, as well as their betrayal of China’s Confucianism. On hearing this, the professor leaves the lecture hall in pain. This professor holds on to the glories of the Republic of China and makes an effort to prevent the glory from being attacked by foreigners. As a May Fourth hero who helps to subvert imperial power and prides himself on May Fourth, he feels conflicted between holding onto his personal pride in the May Fourth New
Culture Movement and having to teach Chinese civilization from imperial China. When the two professors reunite, their reminiscing about the adventures of the May Fourth movement excites them, yet by the end of the story the period becomes a stressful spiritual burden to them. “May Fourth” symbolizes an ideal they held in their youth and abandoned later in life.

Obsessed with the glorious past and victimized by his romantic ideals, Professor Yu keeps silent for years. When talking to Professor Wu he “kept patting his stiff, aching leg.”74 He is handicapped and finds the pain difficult to live with: “He dragged himself over to the side table in one corner of the living room…he limped painfully back to his seat. His right leg was feeling stiffer and stiffer from sitting for so long, and a numbing pain seemed to seep out in waves from his knee.”75 He is much weaker and more infirm than when he was young. His son, on the other hand, resembles Yu’s look at his: “a tall, slender young man … he was carrying a pile of books.”76 His physical sickness and decaying body further enhances his loneliness and disappointment in Taiwan.

Yu’s mental sickness is even more serious than his physical sickness. In his college years, Yu was fascinated by Lord Byron, a leading poet in the Romantic Movement. Because of his engagement in the Greek war if independence, Byron’s romanticist poetry is often used before and during the May Fourth period to symbolize the pursuit of liberty against imperialist oppression.77 Yu’s romantic ideals and poetic nature led to his involvement in the May Fourth

74 Ibid., 402.
75 Ibid., 406.
76 Ibid., 412.
77 For example, in a 1907 article Lu Xun promoted poets like Byron, who resorted to action and resistance for national independence and freedom in their works. See Lu Xun, “Moluo shili shuo” 摩羅詩力說 [The Power of Mara Poetry], in Lu Xun quanji 魯迅全集 [Collected works of Lu Xun] vol.1 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2005), 77–85.
Movement, even at the cost of being arrested. And he fell in love with a college beauty, Ya-hsing, to whom he dedicated a poem. He was a romantic idealist in his youth, but his ideals shatter over the years. Although he teaches Byron at school, his dream of translating Byron is disappearing. He has not been able to finish translating Byron’s *Collected Poems*, a project that he started many years before; he hasn’t translated one word in the last seven or eight years, and is afraid that “there wouldn’t be many people who’d want to read it now.”

Byron becomes an imagined ideal of freedom that is receding further and further away from him. What is left is prosaic reality.

Professor Yu’s family life resembles the change in his sociocultural engagement. In his twenties he fell in love with the most beautiful girl at school, Ya-hsing, and married her. The description of her is pure and romantic: “Ya-hsing had just cut off her braids, and her beautiful hair flew about in the wind. In her dark blue college skirt she stood beside Pei-hai Lake. Her skirt fluttered in the breeze. The evening light in the west set the whole lake on fire and tinged her face with a crimson glow.”

In his poem dedicated to Ya-hsing, he wrote, “…Hsing Hsing/you are the Goddess Who Walks on the Waves.” To Yu, she is “the kind of woman you always remember.”

Ya-hsing embodies youth, ideals, dreams; in comparison, the narrative does not devote much space to Yu’s current wife except to note that she has a “broad, corpulent back.”

Ouyang Zi points out, “Ya-hsing symbolizes ideal, spirit and love; in other words, the past. The second wife represents reality, material, and body; in other words, the present.”

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79 Ibid., 420.
80 Ibid., 412.
81 Ibid., 390.
82 Ouyang Zi, *Yu Xie Tangqian de Yanzi*, 282.
Ya-hsing indicates the disappearance of an idealistic, romantic love that sustains Yu spiritually. On the contrary, the current wife does not care about him spiritually but only maintains a mundane and uninspiring family life: she indulges in playing Mahjong with neighbors in order to gamble, and ignores his request to host his friend.\(^{83}\) He may have to choose to live in the present and reality, yet he is constantly longing for the past and the good old days. Near the end of the story Professor Yu is taken aback when he is falling asleep in the couch: “Half-asleep, he could vaguely hear the sounds of mahjong tiles being shuffled and the women laughing and chattering next door.

Professor Yu’s son, Chun-yen, looks identical to his father, Yu Ch’in-lei. He represents Yu’s hope of going to the United States to study and live. Professor Wu Cho-kuo shows his surprise when seeing Yu’s son: “Chun-yen! If I had seen you first when I came in, I would have thought your father had been restored to his youth! Ch’in-lei, you looked just like Chun-yen here when you were at Peita.”\(^{84}\) The son, Chun-yen, is looking for a fellowship to study physics at Berkeley, carrying on the May Fourth movement’s faith in and promotion of science. He represents both his father’s past memories with his ex-wife Ya-hsing and a potential future of yet unfulfilled May Fourth ideals.

But at the same time Yu’s son no longer embodies the romantic and literary ideals that his father used to have. Although Professor Yu and his son’s generations are eager to pursue a life outside of Taiwan, they have different values. Holding the American dream that is popular among Taiwanese after WWII, Yu Ch’in-lei and his son Chun-yen are eager to teach and to study in America. A scholar uses a common phrase to describe the Yus’ craziness for America.

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\(^{83}\) Pai Hsien-yung, *Taipei People*, 388.

\(^{84}\) Ibid., 414.
“Come Come, Come to N.T.U., Go Go Go, Go to the America; this famous Tongue Twister in the 60’s is the best portraiture of Yu and his son.”

Yu’s son now going to the United States for further studies follows the trend in Taiwan society. However, his pragmatic choice to study physics is more for personal development and wealth, rather than May Fourth intellectuals’ ambitious goal of saving their country.

Professor Yu’s friend, Wu Chu-kuo, does not lead the successful life that everyone in Taiwan thinks he does. Leading a lonely life in America, he can only be comforted by talking about China’s past glories:

I don’t have to feel ashamed at all when I tell my students: In this time, the T’ang Dynasty built the most powerful and culturally the most splendid empire in the world—just like that, I’ve been thundering forth these pronouncements all these years abroad. Sometimes I can’t help laughing to myself and feeling, when I talk to these foreigners, like one of Emperor Hsuan-tsung’s white-haired court ladies who never ceased boasting about the glories of the T’ien-pao Era—.

Here, Professor Yu uses an allusion to the poem by Yuan Zhen (779–831), which laments the white-haired court ladies, who lived through the apex of the T’ang, but never enjoyed it themselves because they were locked up in the abandoned palace for forty years. Neither did they have the opportunity to be close to the emperor. Yu’s self-identification with these abandoned ladies shows that, he is trying to associate himself with a glorious period of civilization, which is important to establishing his cultural identity in an alien country. Meanwhile, he has already lost or has never been granted the access to this great civilization; needless to say that in his May Fourth years he denied it. Therefore, Prof. Yu’s identification

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86 Pai Hsien-yung, Taipei People, 404–6.
with China’s glorious civilization is conflicted, which creates the existential anxiety and endless agony for him.

Professor Wu’s retelling of the May Fourth Movement—what he shares and what he does not—shows how he views the event and the legacy he is still carrying. When telling his students about the Movement, he shows pride in its anti-Japanese, patriotic activities: “The leader of those Chinese students who beat up the envoy to Japan is standing right here in front of you.” But he fails to realize or admit the deficiencies of the movement. He also fails to defend the Movement when a scholar attending the same conference with him in Taipei humiliates both professors with a paper entitled “A Re-valuation of the May Fourth Movement.” The scholar in the story criticizes the idealistic young Chinese students: “these young Chinese, ignorant of the current conditions in China, blindly worshipped Western culture and had a superstitious belief in Western democracy and science.” Contrary to the audience’s expectation, Professor Wu leaves the room without giving comments. His avoidance of May Fourth’s deficiencies point to his complex relationship with it. While the lingering nostalgia for the May Fourth New Culture Movement is genuine, his nostalgia for the great yet lost civilization might work more like a defense mechanism in the alien culture: only such glories rather than the national humiliations can become the basis for his cultural identity. Just like the characters in “Glory’s by the Blossom Bridge,” characters in “Winter Nights” cannot accept the reality of the present moment.

While Professor Yu and Professor Wu’s shared syndrome, the loss of nationalist ideals and spiritual devastation is also found in their fellow May Fourth participants in the story. Just like the characters in “Glory’s by Blossom Bridge,” characters in “Winter Nights” become

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87 Ibid., 398.
88 Ibid., 404.
victims of the loss of the cultural center on Mainland China. The intellectuals in the story, who used to be May Fourth activists, are victimized by the spiritual devastation after the decline of Nationalist May Fourth spirit and the Communist takeover of Mainland China after World War II. The winter nights in Taiwan, with which the story begins and closes, helps to reveal the hardship and cruelty. The story begins in desolate tones: “Winter nights in Taipei, it usually rains cold rain.” And the story ends with the same desolation: “(t)he winter night in Taipei deepened as the cold rain outside the window continued to fall incessantly.” The only progress in the story has been from a cold rain that falls “usually” to one that falls “incessantly.” Relief from their home-sickness is apparently something that will be denied these aging nationalists.

Overseas Chinese students are often constituted in terms of an absence of national identity, which amounts to a pathology: wherever they are, they are homesick; and they are yearning for an idealized nation that exists only in their imagination and memory. In these overseas Chinese student writings, we find a full-blown theme of homelessness, which in fact is diasporic yearning for the lost cultural center of China. Characters in these stories are constantly searching for a sense of home and emotional belonging due to the loss of their national identity and the intricate relationships between Mainland China, Taiwan and America. Through their diasporic characters operating as outsiders-within, these waishengren writers who later went to the United States pinpoint the “home/sickness” of the waishengren in Taiwan. At the same time, the home-sickness in Taiwan—the cultural vulnerability under the rule of the Nationalist government—becomes the main cause of overseas Chinese students’ homesickness. While the Nationalist obsession with cultural China occupies the waishengren’s minds, the home these

89 Ibid., 386.
90 Ibid., 420.
overseas Chinese imagine and long for serves as merely a fantasized sanctuary, a temporary cure to their homesickness away from home. Their homesickness therefore should be ascribed less to their homeland being torn by wars and political struggles and more to their sick notion of home—a “home” they insist should take the form of an idealized nationalist ideology and national identity that no longer exists. And this imaginary “home” is both a cause of and cure to overseas Chinese’s homesickness.
Chapter Two
Home-Building in the Mao-era: The Dialectic between Politics and Family in Yan Geling’s Novels

Zhang Xiaogang’s surrealist painting “Bloodline: Big Family” (1993)\(^1\) offers insights into how families were affected by Maoist ideology. The painting uses dark shades to depict three figures wearing black and grey, who sit for their portrait in front of a grey background. The parents wear typical Mao-style clothing; the mother tilts her head towards her husband and child; the child’s face is unusually red. The faces of the family are in half shadow, with only a patch of fractured light illuminating their expressions. Those expressions are blank and stare nearly straight ahead in rigid formality. The figures’ eyes are empty and still, making it difficult for viewers to connect with or identify with the family. Although they stand close to each other, the family does not look intimate or happy, as if each person were concealing secrets. The father looks straight ahead; the mother slightly to the right; and the child straight ahead, though one of his eyes is crossed, suggesting isolation and distance amidst physical proximity. A thin red string, almost invisible, loops through the mother’s jacket button, around the child’s wrist, and over the father’s ear. Because of the connotations of the color red in this context, the viewer is invited to associate the red string with the Communist Party. Yet the string here is thin, almost imperceptible; if this string is meant, like Communist ideology, to bind this family together, it does so only weakly. In that way, the title “Bloodline,” a term often associated with ancestral strength and connection, becomes ironic.

The painting portrays the challenge of defining the concept of family and the meaning of interpersonal relationships during the Mao era. The nation and the family are inherently connected as implied by the Chinese compound term guojia 国家, with “guo” meaning nation and “jia” referring to family. Intrinsically the two are inseparable in a Chinese context, but in the Mao era the notion of family came to be threatened. After the Communist government gained central power after the civil war with the governing Nationalist party, known as the KMT) in 1945, they sought new ways to govern the land. From the 1950s to 1970s, Chairman Mao developed Maoism as a guiding philosophy for the new country. This, however, led to an extreme cult of personality surrounding Mao in later years. As often portrayed through various forms of propaganda, he was cast as the ultimate patriarchal figure and icon.2

In Maoist discourse, individuals were meant to sacrifice for collective benefits, leaving them open to becoming victims of the Communist revolution as their personal loves and ideals were mostly destroyed. Love became subordinated to or worked in service of revolution: “The relationship of the revolutionary husband and wife should be first and foremost that of comrades… the feeling between husband and wife is first of all that of revolution.”3 Some revolutionaries responded to the Communist nation-building project by suppressing their desires and love, yet many of them also became victims of this ideology. As Jianmei Liu points out,

2 In Mao Zedong’s “Talks at the Yenan Forum on Art and Literature,” he states the purpose of their meeting is “to make art and literature a component part of the whole revolutionary machine.” See Mao Tse-tung [Mao Zedong], Talks at the Yenan Forum on Art and Literature (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1960), 2. In films set during the Cultural Revolution, we often see portraits of Mao hanging in people’s houses. For instance, Jiang Wen’s In the Heat of the Sun (1994) includes scenes of boys gathering at a long table, with Chairman Mao’s picture hanging on the wall in the background. Similarly in Mao’s Last Dancer (2009), people dance while Mao’s portrait hangs in the middle of the room.

3 Zhang Fan, et al., ed. Lian’ai hunyin yu fufu shenghuo 戀愛婚姻與夫婦生活 [Love, marriage and life as a couple] (Shanghai: Zhanwang zhoushe, 1952), II.
“political ideologies called for the postponement of love and the subordination of sexual relationships to the revolutionary agenda.”

Maoist ideology categorized love and marriage as bourgeois ideas and re-defined home as being represented by the collective, proletarian masses. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), “Private feelings, sex, and personal love, which were regarded by the Communist Party as harmful and destructive elements, were expelled from literary production.”

The expulsion of those emotions from cultural productions, like books and plays, reveals the extent to which personal love and feelings were suppressed under Mao. This suppression produced a huge void in terms of family and emotions during the Mao era.

After the Cultural Revolution, however, personal love, interpersonal connection, and sexuality re-emerged in literary representations. Avant-garde writers publishing in the 1980s, such as Su Tong, Mo Yan and Ge Fei, employed love and sex in their novels to deconstruct the national myths of the Mao era. This chapter discusses a contemporary Chinese immigrant writer, Yan Geling, who continues to address the emotional void and the deficient sense of family in the Mao era, a subject matter which partially explains her popularity among the generation that experienced the Mao era. Her novels examined in this chapter address that void by dramatizing the dynamic of nation/politics and family/marriage, that is, between nation (國 guo) and family (家 jia). By portraying individual relationships and love—as opposed to revolutionary fervor—as glorious and heroic, her works indirectly criticize a Mao regime that suppressed individuality and replaced it with political discourse. My aim in this chapter is to explore how guo and jia respond to each other in Chinese diasporic writer Yan Geling’s works, how her novels respond to the

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5 Ibid., 23.
institutionalized Maoist ideology, and, how a sense of “home” is generated in her work through dynamic of nation/politics (guo) and family/marriage (jia) during the Mao era.

Yan Geling’s works set in Maoist China bring us a feeling of déjà vu from the “Scar literature” of the 1970s and 80s, when personal tragedies were used to attack Communist Party hypocrisy and corruption. In arguing that Yan’s two Cultural Revolution novels—A Woman’s Epic and The Criminal Lu Yanshi—undo the process of cultural forgetting, for example, Shenshen Cai compares her work to the Scar literature (also called, “literature of the wounded,” shanghen wenxue 傷痕文學) of the late 1970s and early 1980s that re-captured the suffering of officials and intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution primarily through narrations of personal experience. Indeed, the theme of The Criminal Lu Yanshi seemingly echoes the action of Lu Xinhua’s story that typifies the genre of Scar literature, “The Scar” (1978). In both stories, the relationships (husband and wife in The Criminal; daughter and mother in “Scar”) are torn apart by the political regime and an anticipated reunion fails in the end. Both Lu Yanshi’s endless waiting in the Labor Camp and Wanyu’s eternal waiting for her husband’s homecoming shares similarities with the ending of “Scar,” in which the daughter returns too late to meet her mother one last time. These works reveal an awareness of the feelings that had been suppressed during the Cultural Revolution. Yet, other elements of Scar literature—its expressions of hope for the future of the Communist Party, or efforts to simply narrate the historical details of the trauma of

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6 The relationship between nationalism and individualism was not new to Maoist thought, but predominated in the May Fourth Movement in early 20th Century. The relationship between nationalism and individualism has remained an important question for Chinese people in the entire 20th Century.

7 Lu Xinhua published his first story “The Scar” (aka “The Wounded”) in Wenhui Daily (11 Aug 1978) when he was a freshman at Fudan University in Shanghai. This story depicts a female Red Guard, Wang Xiaohua, who is cuts off from her mother after the latter is denounced as “traitor.” When her mother is proven innocent nine years later, Wang returns home only to find her mother dead with a scar on the forehead. This story became instantly famous, and has come to be thought of as a pure representation of Scar Literature.
the Cultural Revolution—diffuse the political agenda of these stories, and blunt the critique of the Mao regime.\(^8\)

Thus comparing Yan’s works with earlier Scar literature is useful but limiting. Because of when it was published, Scar literature could not present direct criticism of Mao or other social problems without risking censorship. Under such restrictions, the personal feelings and individual stories in the genre, once again, were fashioned to serve the purpose of the collective. In “Scar literature” the Gang of Four are scapegoated as the cause of the suffering, thereby reinforcing the ideals of Communist leadership and Party rules; in comparison, Yan’s novels use personal and intricate relationships to retrieve both the cultural memory of the Cultural Revolution and the critique of Mao. The question remains: how could Yan Geling critique the Mao regime and the Cultural Revolution in her novels without being censored? In addition to her close connections with the Chinese Communist Party, she also renders her criticisms very subtly in her novels.

In spite of this subtlety, scholars have focused on politics and to a large extent ignored the personal relationships in Yan Geling’s two Red novels, *The Criminal Lu Yanshi* (*Lu fan Yanshi* 陸犯焉讒, 2011) and *A Woman’s Epic* (*Yige nüren de shishi* 一個女人的史詩, 2006). To some scholars, these two novels serve the social function of rejecting efforts to erase the tragic events of China’s modern history from national memory. Shenshen Cai argues that the works “probe into the political and cultural catalysts that contribute to the authoritarian rule of Mao and

\(^8\) Yibing Huang has elaborated on this topic. Particularly, Huang points out through the discussion of Li Jiangyun’s stories that Scar literature is overly simplistic, and may have covered up many more complex and perhaps darker human truths and unnamed historical traumas. See his *Contemporary Chinese Literature: From the Cultural Revolution to the Future* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 90.
the subsequent social and human catastrophes of this traumatic period.” Similarly, Namyong Park argues that *The Criminal Lu Yanshi* in particular resists the forgetting of China’s tragic modern history. While these scholars rightly highlight these efforts at recovering history, their focus on the historical and political representations overlooks the complex personal relationships and emotions that are at the heart of both works.

Although Yan’s two novels present a lack of moral reflection, as Park argues, they nevertheless demonstrate how individual relationships and personal feelings can be used as a critique of the revolutionary discourse of the Mao era. Individual stories and daily trivialities are well captured in Yan’s stories just as in earlier Scar Literature. David Der-wei Wang suggests that the novel *The Criminal Lu Yanshi* is in many ways a “scar story.” Unlike those earlier works, however, her novels conclude neither with hope for the Communist Party, nor with characters “finding salvation and happiness in the West,” as often happens in Anglophone Cultural Revolution memoirs that begin to appear at the end of the twentieth century. Rather, Yan Geling’s two novels present a symbiotic but resistant relationship between the collective and individuals, politics and family.

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11 Park points out that Yan Geling’s *The Criminal Lu Yanshi* does not directly reveal who is responsible for the tragedy and who is at fault for lost lives.


By highlighting personal relationships and persistent love under the Mao regime, Yan Geling’s novels humanize revolutionary discourse. At first glance, *The Criminal Lu Yanshi* and *A Woman’s Epic* can be categorized as a “revolution plus love” stories, as both novels probe the political and cultural crisis of the Mao era through stories of love and marriage. Both novels dramatize a great, unconditional love given by a beautiful, devoted woman to a somewhat less devoted man: Feng Wanyu (Lu Yanshi’s wife in *Criminal*) and Tian Sufei (Ouyang Yu’s wife in *Epic*). Despite suffering from their husbands’ neglect, the wives sacrifice everything for love, and rescue their spouses even when they are punished severely over the years for their “counter-revolutionary” actions and words. In the end, both men realize their love for their wives and reunite with them. However, her works distinguish themselves from typical “revolution plus love” stories, which usually feature an unlikely romantic situation that is resolved or sublimated by revolutionary activism. Yan Geling’s stories point in the opposite direction—impossible romantic situations are resolved in spite of revolutionary activism, thereby restoring grandeur and significance to humanity and private feelings. By emphasizing individual love stories, she is arguing against the Maoist regime when politics were placed over everything.

This chapter engages the historical moment when a disrupted political regime and destroyed homeland forced intellectuals into exile; it asks how individuals fought and struggled to hold onto love, marriage and family through the political turmoil. Instead of defining “home” in relation to national identity, “home” in Yan’s works is split between Communist collectives and individuals. *The Criminal Lu Yanshi* shows that home in such circumstances is an impossibility—there is no sense of home that can be conjured up between the dynamics of

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14 Jianmei Liu’s term in her book *Revolution Plus Love* (2003). The theme of “revolution Plus Love” was first popularized in the late 1920s. Liu examines the writing of “revolution plus love” from the 1930s to the 1970s as a case study of literary politics.
nation/politics and family/marriage during the Mao era. *A Woman's Epic* is more optimistic by showing a hope that survives as long as one clings to love, marriage and family. It is a political critique by itself. During the Mao era, the Communist regime defines the collective, political unit as “home.” But Yan Geling’s two Red novels argue that personal connections based on political ideals cannot be a viable container for a nation’s hope and future. *The Criminal Lu Yanshi* shows that the Mao era destroyed the sense of home. *A Woman’s Epic* presents home as a possibility, but only one to be gained strictly through personal feelings apart from politics.

1. Yan Geling and Her “Red” Novels

Yan Geling has been a productive writer on both the Chinese and English literary scenes. Born in Shanghai in 1958, she was a dancer before becoming a writer and performed in the People’s Liberation Army during the Cultural Revolution. In the 1970s she served as a journalist for the military on the border between China and Vietnam. Yan started writing fiction in the 1980s and published her first novel *Seven Soldiers and One Zero* (*Qige zhanshi yige ling*) in 1985. In late 1989 Yan went to the United States and was awarded a scholarship by Columbia College in Chicago. She studyied creative writing and earned an MFA. Although she wrote in English while earning this degree, Yan mostly publishes in Chinese, while writing about Chinese subjects: “Chinese life is very unknown to the rest of the world,” says Yan, “I feel I have a mission to introduce it.”\(^\text{15}\) Up to now the only novel she has written in

English is *The Banquet Bug* (2006).\textsuperscript{16} Yan has published several novels including *The Lost Daughter of Happiness* (*Fusang* 扶桑, 1996),\textsuperscript{17} *The Human World* (*Ren huan* 人寰, 1998), *Café Without a Way Out* (*Wu chulu de kafeiguan* 無出路的咖啡館, 2001), *Flowers and Youngsters* (*Hua’r yu Shaonian* 花兒與少年, 2004), *The Ninth Widow* (*Di jiuge guafu* 第九個寡婦, 2006), *A Woman’s Epic* (*Yige nüren de shishi* 一個女人的史诗, 2006), *The Flowers of War* (*Jinling Shisan Chai* 金陵十三釵, 2007),\textsuperscript{18} *Little Aunt Crane* (*Xiaoyi duohe* 小姨多鶴, 2008),\textsuperscript{19} *Parasite* (*Jiju zhe* 寄居者, 2009), *The Criminal Lu Yanshi* (*Lu fan Yanshi* 陸犯焉識, 2011).\textsuperscript{20} She is also the author of several novellas including *Young Lady Xiaoyu* (*Shaonü Xiaoyu* 少女小漁, 1993), *Over the Sea* (*Hai nabian* 海那邊, 1993). Her works have both sold well and been popular with critics, as evidenced by the number of awards and honors she has received.\textsuperscript{21}

A number of Yan Geling’s works have been adapted into films such as *Xiu Xiu: The Sent-Down Girl* \textsuperscript{22} (directed by Joan Chen) and *Siao Yu* \textsuperscript{23} (directed by Sylvia Chang; script co-written

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\textsuperscript{16} The novel was translated into Chinese under the title 赴宴者 (*Fuyan zhe*). The work was awarded “Best Book for 2006 in the Adult Fiction Category. See http://lawrenceawalker.wixsite.com/yangeling/books.

\textsuperscript{17} This perhaps is Yan’s most famous novel and also the one most frequently discussed by scholars.

\textsuperscript{18} This novella first appeared in *Novel Monthly* 小說月報 in 2005, and won the Best Novella of 2006 from *Novel Monthly*. It was translated into various languages and made into a film directed by Zhang Yimou.

\textsuperscript{19} The book won the Biennial Novel Prize from *Renmin Wenxue* (People’s Literature) and other prizes. Its English translation *Little Aunt Crane* was published by by Random House in 2016. The book was also made into a popular TV series in China. See http://lawrenceawalker.wixsite.com/yangeling/books.

\textsuperscript{20} Won Shi Nai’an Literature Prize for Best Novel, Overseas Chinese Category for *The Criminal Lu Yanshi*, Oct. 2013.

\textsuperscript{21} For a series of prizes she got see: http://lawrenceawalker.wixsite.com/yangeling/honors--awards.

\textsuperscript{22} *Xiu Xiu: The Sent-Down Girl* (*Tian Yu*) is a feature film based on Yan’s story “Celestial Bath.” The film was celebrated during Taiwan’s Golden Horse Awards (金馬獎) in 1998, winning seven Golden Horses. See http://lawrenceawalker.wixsite.com/yangeling/film-and-tv.

\textsuperscript{23} *Siao Yu* 少女小漁, 1994, adapted from Yan’s novel of the same name. This film is co-written by directors Ang Lee 李安 and Sylvia Chang 張艾嘉.
by Ang Lee); *The Flowers of War* 24 (directed by Zhang Yimou, starring Christian Bale); and *Coming Home* (directed by Zhang Yimou), an adaptation of *The Criminal Lu Yanshi*.

Additionally, Yan has also written screenplays in both English and Chinese, including *Forever Enthralled* (d. Chen Kaige), a biography of Mei Lanfang, star of the Peking Opera; and a Chinese-language adaptation of *Dangerous Liaisons*.

Yan Geling is thus one of the most renowned contemporary female Chinese immigrant writers. In particular, she is known as a feminist writer because of her strong female characters, such as Fusang (from *The Lost Daughter of Happiness*) and Xiao Yu (from *Young Lady Xiaoyu*). Scholars argue, however, that amongst Yan Geling’s independent and strong female characters are others largely rely on men. 26 As I will show, her female characters in the two novels discussed in this chapter are both romantically idealistic about love and emotionally dependent on men. These characterizations challenge Mao’s proposal for the ascendance of women’s status. Mao promoted the idea that women could hold up half of the sky alongside men, but women’s independence was too often circumstantial. Yan’s novels demonstrate that most women served the larger society by being good housewives and loyal lovers. In the novel, the characters heroically build and protect the nation by keeping their homes and families intact. Therefore, her

24 The film was a box office hit in China and was featured in Berlin Film Festival in February 2012. To date it has been released commercially in China, the U.S., the UK and several other countries.

25 Most of this information is taken from her biography website: http://lawrenceawalker.wixsite.com/yangeling/bio/.

26 In her dissertation on the characterization of women in Yan Geling’s short stories, Lin Sheng categorizes Yan’s female protagonists into four kinds: educated, diligent overseas students; women who depend on marriage and pregnancy; women who rely on relatives; Chinese Americans who grew up in the United States. See Lin Sheng, “Yan Geling haiwai duanpian xiaoshuo nüxing xingxiang yanjiu” [The Characterization of Women in Yan Geling’s Overseas Short Stories] (Master thesis, University of Hong Kong, 2015).
feminism is mixed: her female characters survive during political and social turmoil, but they often depend on men to satisfy their emotional needs.

Although many of her works, including Criminal and Epic, are set in China, Yan Geling’s immigrant experience is essential to understanding these novels in particular and her writing in general. Yan has defined immigration as the “weakest, vulnerable existence of life,” which is “most sensitive to the cruel environment” and “tragic destiny.”27 This pessimistic view of the immigrant experience can be seen in her most famous novel, The Lost Daughter of Happiness in which Yan richly demonstrates the pains of cultural vulnerability and the cross-cultural conflicts suffered by early Chinese immigrants to the United States. Yan insists that it is unfair to categorize immigrant literature as marginal literature.28 To her, the ease of traveling between China and America, for instance, gives her many opportunities to narrate Chinese stories from a perspective that is different from Chinese nationals in mainland China.

Although the two novels discussed in this chapter do not focus on immigrants, the protagonists in both novels are sent out to the countryside during the Anti-Rightist Movement29 and the Cultural Revolution, which invokes the notion of “migration.” The move for the two intellectual characters from urban to rural areas is not only a domestic migration geographically but also a psychological and emotional migration. The characters discussed in these novels, though exiled domestically, share similar experiences and mentalities with the members of

28 Ibid., 212. Yan argues that we should look fairly at immigrant literature. Offering the examples of Milan Kundera and Isabel Allende, she claims that their immigrant stories take their work beyond their own national boundaries.
29 During the Anti-Rightist Movement in 1957, the government gathered a number of counter-revolutionaries into a specific location and put them to work for the state while educating them politically.
diaspora. Viewing the novel through the lens of migration and movement helps us to see more clearly the tension among family members during the Mao era.

Like other Chinese immigrant writers, Yan Geling has also been called a realistic writer. She takes inspiration from her life experience and the stories she has heard. Yan Geling’s personal experience as an entertainment troupe soldier and her firsthand experience of the Cultural Revolution have helped shape her writings about Chinese women’s lives during the Mao Era. For instance, *A Woman’s Epic* focuses on the life story of a female entertainment troupe soldier. “Very seldom do I write things that are truly out of the blue,” Yan says. “I always hear extraordinary stories or sometimes read something in a newspaper.”30 In one interview Yan claims that her works about socialist revolutionary times were largely based on recollections and memoirs of her father’s old friends.31 David Der-wei Wang claims that *The Criminal Lu Yanshi* fits into the category of “hardcore realism,”32 a notion first coined by C. T. Hsia, as it realistically demonstrates the tragedies of “victims and the wounded.” In these ways, the detailed descriptions of Lu Yanshi’s experience in the Labor Camp Movement and the Cultural Revolution reflect the tragedies of the time.

2. Re-Membering Home through Trauma—*The Criminal Lu Yanshi*

*The Criminal Lu Yanshi* tells a tragic story involving an intellectual, Lu Yanshi, and his wife Feng Wanyu. Lu Yanshi, born into a privileged Shanghai family, is arranged to marry Feng

Wanyu after his father’s death. Not long after, Yanshi pursues his education in the United States, embracing Western freedoms, both political (free expression of his political beliefs) and personal (Yanshi pursues numerous love affairs). Upon his return to China, Yanshi becomes a professor and leads a complicated life negotiating between his dedicated wife and the demands of his shrewish stepmother. During the Anti-Rightist Movement, Yanshi is condemned as a counter-revolutionary and is sent to the Northwest. In that deserted land, his life as an intellectual is taken away by the authorities. During Yanshi’s twenty years in the labor camp, he always dreams of reuniting with his wife Wanyu and their daughter. His intellectual aspirations eventually fade, yet his affection for Wanyu grows. When he is released from the labor camp twenty years later, Wanyu has lost her memory of him and can no longer recognize her own husband. Yanshi tries hard to win the love of the new Wanyu who views him as a stranger. Finally, the couple remarry, shortly before Wanyu passes away.

Because the government declares Lu Yanshi guilty and takes him away from his family, the couple has to constantly resist the government’s restrictive control. Under Mao’s Communist regime, love is supposed to serve the Communist ideology, but love and the sense of home in this novel are built to resist that ideology. In this way, Yan suggests that the political beliefs of the Mao era, and the bonds of marriage and family, which depend on interpersonal connections, are irreconcilable.

While claiming to provide people with freedom through collective benefits, the Communist Party curtailed personal freedoms and interests through a blind, collective belief in Mao. The novel’s introduction invokes this theme of freedom, with a metaphor that compares prisoners of the state with grassland creatures who are corralled and penned by men with guns. These state prisoners, many of whom are convicted for nebulous or unknown crimes, are forced
to migrate to the rural countryside. The Anti-Rightist Movement and the Cultural Revolution
sentenced a number of individuals like Lu Yanshi to exile in the countryside. This move largely
limited the use of his intellectual talents meanwhile forcing him to be emotionally removed from
his family, thereby completely taking away his freedom to a career and love.

Yanshi advocates freedom and political ideals that run against the core values of
communism. He acts on these beliefs, which he has always held, during his five years in
America. Shrewd, quick, funny, and competitive, he constantly attends political speeches and
frequently makes his own. He particularly speaks about topics that would be taboo in China: the
Soviet Union, conflicts between Japan and America, secret treaties, etc. He pursues social
freedoms as well: he actively participates in clubs and organizations; he flirts and has affairs.\(^{33}\) It
seems that America is his space for freedom, where he has full control of his own life, his own
loves, without interference from family or government.

When he returns from America in the early 1950s, his freedom and pride become an
embarrassment to his family.\(^ {34}\) In turn, he doesn’t feel as if he belongs in his old home. He feels
more \textit{at home} in liberal environments, like his campus, or American associations or American-
style restaurants and cafes. His American friends seem to bring American cultures and ideals
with them to China, creating a space for themselves which they call home. Although his
personality and experience cause him to be dedicated to a pursuit of freedom in both politics and
love, this dedication and idealism create problems for his later life.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 89.
This pursuit of freedom is also visible in Lu Yanshi’s love life. Yanshi is never ashamed of his affairs, which take place throughout the early years of his marriage. He first has an affair with an Italian girl while abroad, and later keeps a mistress when he returns to China. This attitude differs greatly from his wife’s. Wanyu, in order to save Yanshi’s life, offers herself to a government official, Mr. Dai. However, this sexual encounter fills her with shame and guilt.\textsuperscript{35} Yanshi sees his affairs not as marital infidelity but as a courageous pursuit of freedom.

Yanshi’s mistress Nianhen embodies his ideal of freedom in romantic life. Compared to Wanyu, Nianhen is a more modern woman, determined and independent, with a business of her own. At the same time, Nianhen is kind, generous and understanding. When Yanshi is in prison, she helps send his letters to his family; when he loses his job after getting out of prison, she supports him financially. But underneath her gentleness she possesses a spirit of “combat.”\textsuperscript{36} Yanshi has a passionate, close relationship with Nianhen; his love for her has much less to do with Nianhen herself and more to do with the fact that he is free to choose to love her. At the end of the novel, he leaves his family taking only his clothes and Wanyu’s ashes, as if he were helping to make his wife’s eternal return to a real “home,” as the Chinese term “\textit{luoye guigen}” (returning to homeland when one dies) suggests. The family no longer offers him a sense of home, and he wants to go looking for an open possibility for the future.

The prisoners, including Yanshi, long for freedom, yet under the Communist regime freedom is restricted. Therefore they look for secret ways to obtain freedom—expressions that might go undetected or concealed. Even suicide, which might be thought of as a desperate, is deemed an acceptable pathway to freedom, though “resistance, protest and expression of

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 444.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 198.
antagonism.” When one prisoner is sentenced to death, he writes these final words: “Long live the motherland.” Even at the moment of his death, a death accelerated by the state, he must conceal his sarcasm in the guise of patriotism. In the restrictive political system, prisoners constantly look for and find ways to speak out and get away with it. Once they pretend to be sleep walkers, getting up in the middle of the night and wandering around the compound. When asked to go back to their own beds, they interpret the order to “return” differently in order to wander around longer. The dream-wandering charade shows their hidden desire to be set free, while also suggesting that the longer-for freedom can only be achieved while dreaming. Yanshi realizes his mind is awake to the shouts of the warders whereas his body wanders to other places that it wants to be in. The prisoners straddle the country that is and the country that they long for—one that grants freedom and benefits to its citizens.

While taking away freedoms, the Communist Regime also reduces individuality, since everyone is supposed to work for the collective. This can be seen in how Lu Yanshi’s intellectual power is reduced. During his time in prison, the Mao government conducts a massive program of linguistic engineering to transform their citizens ideologically. In the Labor camp, Yanshi serves as an editor for the wall newspaper, one of the main channels for promoting the Communist ideology; in this role his language is tightly controlled. Most of the content he is asked to write concerns self-reflection and self-criticism in the context of readings from Mao’s writings. After years in the camp, he is very familiar with what to praise, what to hate and what

37 Ibid., 218.
38 Ibid., 82–3.
39 Ibid., 334.
40 To learn more about linguistic engineering during the Mao era, see Ji Fengyuan, *Linguistic Engineering: Language and Politics in Mao’s China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004).
to criticize.\textsuperscript{41} Later, Lu Yanshi is sent around the country to make motivational speeches in a typical exemplar of Communist propaganda. He is forced to read a script written by a clerk in the publicity department; the script aims to demonstrate how a shameless criminal can be transformed by the policy of the Communists.\textsuperscript{42} As an editor and speaker, Yanshi serves merely as a prop for the Party to educate people and to serve the Communist collective. To Lu Yanshi, the scholar and intellectual who receives a foreign education and loves the life of the mind, the loss of the freedom to speak and write his own thoughts and words is devastating.

When individuality is largely reduced under the Maoist regime, so are individual and personal feelings. Over ten years Lu Yanshi writes Wanyu numerous letters; for each letter he creates two versions: one is an open version that he knows will be screened by the XXXX letter box and the eyes behind it; the other is his private version, read by no one but himself.\textsuperscript{43} The “XXXX” do not represent the English letter “X,” but indicate crosses. Normally the letter box has numbers on it, but the author represents it with these four crosses, suggesting censorship; Yanshi does not know who will read his letters, but knows for sure that they will be read by someone. The “XXXX” letter box indicates a pair of eyes of an anonymous official who strictly follows the government’s orders. In this way, he struggles through a double existence—one that is public and shaped to please the government and another that he keeps to himself. In this scenario, the true emotions he has for Wanyu and his family can only remain buried in his heart, or be expressed in a hidden letter that no one else will read. For instance, in the private version of one letter, a version he knows he can not send, Yanshi writes to Wanyu about the day he was

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 309.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 222.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 228.
\end{flushright}
arrested, saying that his thoughts often return to how he said farewell, remembering how Wanyu followed him into his study before going downstairs and watching him being taken away by the police. When he looks back, he writes, he sees she is holding his slippers in her hand, making him believe that he would eventually come home.\textsuperscript{44} Comparatively the opening of the version that he actually sends is business-like, asking Wanyu to deliver some daily necessities to the prison.

Thus Yanshi composes these private letters for a public audience; he knows the letters are read by the eyes behind the letter box through which they communicate: “The eyes behind XXXX letter box made him feel as if he and Wanyu were being seen naked.”\textsuperscript{45} The effect, though, is far beyond mere exposure—beyond private emotions becoming a public spectacle. Rather, the letters are exposed to pairs of eyes described as dirty—those that have “watched violent killing and atrocity, and have become accustomed to blood and dung.”\textsuperscript{46} Beyond surveillance, this process contaminates, not only soiling the purity and love Yanshi and Wanyu’s letters, but also negating and disrupting their intimacy.

More and more, those thoughts and words, and even feelings that are uniquely his own, disappear. The more Lu Yanshi writes Communist propaganda, the less he can articulate and form his own inner thoughts. Twice he receives the death penalty, and each time he attempts to write a note of farewell to Wanyu. But both times, the pages remain empty, as final words and death scare him into silence. Wanyu occupies a private space in his heart as a special confidante, a part of his life separate from the public world of politics. But after so many years of being

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 123.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
forced to ventriloquize the words of others, of viewing language as a tool only of public
expression and education, of having to conceal and hide his own inner world, he finds it harder
and harder to express that inner life in any external or visible form.

Under such serious surveillance, then, the family becomes nothing but a small unit in the
Communist collective. When Yanshi is labeled as a counter-revolutionary, his family has to
choose between him and the government. The novel shows that Yanshi’s family, consciously or
unconsciously, follows Maoist ideology and rejects Yanshi.47 Without much knowledge of their
father’s life in the labor camp, Yanshi’s family tries to define him based on how the government
instructs them to. Rather than trying to understand the love between his parents, Yanshi’s son
Ziye prioritizes the benefit of the family and the collective. Ziye is a product of Maoist ideology.
Upset by losing his first girlfriend because of his father’s background, and worried that the
family will suffer further because of his father’s crimes, he encourages his mother to sign divorce
papers.48 On hearing the news that Yanshi has been released from prison, Ziye only feels worried
and nervous. He first disbelieves the letter, thinking that Yanshi has possibly run away instead of
being released. He then believes Yanshi’s return will only bring the family trouble. He does not
show any sympathy towards his father but instead denies him. He also tries to convince his sister
to write a letter to keep Yanshi away from their household. When picking up his father at the
train station, Ziye asks his daughter to greet Yanshi as a generic “grandpa” instead of calling him
“father” directly, which would reveal their blood relations. To him the family has been the real
victim, its members invisibly imprisoned because they lost the trust of the government and the

47 Under the Mao regime everyone must show loyalty to the state. If any member of the family commits an offense
against the state, it’s one’s duty and legal obligation to expose that member to the government. See C. K. Yang, The
masses. Instead of trying to figure out if his father is actually guilty, Ziye blindly believes in the government’s judgment. The ties that should bind the family together—love, trust, honor and respect—have been dissolved by the actions of the government, which encourages family members to distrust and suspect each other, redirecting that familial love to the state instead.

While Ziye represents a hardcore Communist who turns a blind eye to his parents’ love, Yanshi and Wanyu’s daughter Dantong is more compassionate and understanding. She is their only daughter, the offspring of their passionate love making just before Yanshi goes to prison. Ironically, she, like her father, also becomes a prop for Communist propaganda. As charming as her father, Dantong becomes the main actress in an educational film which aims to achieve what Chairman Mao promotes—an attempt to “cure all the blood-flukes” (meaning eliminate all the bad elements from society). By being a featured actress in propaganda films, Dantong is unconsciously absorbed into the Communist agenda.

While Yanshi and Wanyu’s children are more concerned with their own lives and careers than with their father, Wanyu tries to hold on to her feelings for Yanshi. However, even she cannot avoid the impact of the Party on her daily life. Though a strong believer in Yanshi’s return, she knows that recognizing Yanshi as their father will harm her children’s lives. Gradually after Yanshi’s long absence, she begins a new life that accedes to the Party. She moves to an area where a number of Communists reside; the neighborhood committee visits her and gives her the Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung to study. Encouraged by her neighbors, she

\[49\] Ibid., 402.
\[50\] Ibid., 27.
\[51\] Ibid., 359.
joins the older women’s club and the Party itself. She drifts into Maoist ideology without much thinking or deliberate choice.

Although Maoist ideology and politics play such dominant roles in their lives, the characters in the novel show a marked ignorance of them. Yanshi’s family and friends either romanticize Communism without understanding it or they prioritize politics over their family and friendship. Yanshi’s nephew, Pierre, who grew up abroad is very idealistic about China, runs away from home and fights for the Communist revolutionary cause with Yanshi’s old schoolmate David. David and Yanshi dislike each other because of their different views of the Party.\(^{52}\) The fact that Pierre becomes a revolutionary after such a short time is ironic, since it seems the public is mostly ignorant of what revolution means. No one in the novel can define the term revolution, for example. The ambiguity of the concept leads Yanshi’s daughter to say naively, “If all the counter-revolutionaries gather together and establish a nation, it would be a mess.”\(^ {53}\) She assumes that a counter-revolutionary is bad but she does not know why. She changes her mind when two of her favorite teachers became counter-revolutionaries. Whether Yanshi and these teachers are actually counter-revolutionary or not is never explained; if they are, their reasons for being so are never clear.\(^ {54}\) These “counter-revolutionaries” are all sent out to the countryside without even knowing what crime they have committed. Revolution is presented as a dominating but ambiguous concept in all these characters’ lives and choices.

Just as characters are ignorant of the meaning of “revolutionary” and “counter-revolutionary,” they have a vague understanding of Communism. To Wanyu, “the ‘ism’ here is

\(^{52}\) Ibid., 301.
\(^{53}\) Ibid., 305.
\(^{54}\) Ibid., 305.
very beautiful, like poetry and painting, very pure and monotonous, just like all those doctrines that persuade you to be kind and good.” In this way, Wanyu and others romanticize Communism without logical reasoning or a deep understanding of its tenets.

Ironically, although Yanshi is judged as “counter-revolutionary,” he seems to be as innocent as one could be during the time of the Cultural Revolution. David Wang points out that the protagonist’s name, “Yanshi,” in traditional Chinese means, “How to know this?” The “crime” he commits remains unidentified. The novel spends many pages describing how Yanshi is accused of his crime, yet never identifies clearly what crime he actually committed. The narrator explains that it is useless for Yanshi’s family to seek clarification because “at that time the crimes were all abstract.” It is as if the story looked away from his crime by focusing on his victimization, the tortures he endured in the Labor Camp, etc.; even the very nature of the crime is omitted. This represents the irrationality of the labor camp—everyone is obliged to obey the Maoist ideology and the counter-revolutionists are sent to prison, yet it is never clear how they became criminals in the first place. When Yanshi gets a fifteen-year sentence, the other prisoners react as if he won the lottery because the sentence is lighter than most other punishments. The punishment is later extended twice to death, then reduced to life in prison. Just like people’s belief in communism, the reasons for Yanshi’s imprisonment and sentences are arbitrary, which was common during Mao’s time. The fickle nature of the sentences suggests the instability and randomness of the political judgment of the time. His family never figures out what kind of

55 Ibid., 395.
56 Ibid., 380.
crime he has committed, and yet some of them blindly believe the government’s assertion of his guilt.

The couple in the novel tries to sustain love within this irrational environment. Despite his insistence on freedom in his political and romantic ideals, Yanshi clearly realizes his own love for Wanyu over time. Wanyu becomes the “home” he wants to return to. When he runs away from prison and faces the possibility of death, he makes sure to face in the direction of Wanyu,\textsuperscript{58} as if the direction he is running in might bring him back home. Despite the vague picture of Wanyu in his heart, Yanshi makes every effort to re-construct her image in his mind and to maintain a connection with her through his letters. That connection sustains him through the despair of the labor camp. The biggest hope he has in the prison—to get out and return home to reunite with his family—keeps him alive. Wanyu embodies an imagined homeland for him.

Wanyu symbolizing Yanshi’s imagined home has something to do with her personality. She represents an ideal, traditional Chinese woman, loyal to her husband and family. Not at all outspoken like Yanshi, Wanyu seems quiet, gentle and obedient. Her name, “Wanyu” not only suggests “curvy, as if” as David Der-wei Wang suggests, but in its Mandarin pronunciation, symbolizes “like a jade.” Jade, a rare and strong material in ancient China, suggests that Wanyu possesses purity and strength. Even when she lives under the same roof with Yanshi and his young stepmother, Wanyu yields to their wishes. She only disobeys Yanshi once in the novel—when he begs her to divorce him in order to spare the children from sharing his disgrace. Wanyu refuses to do so, always hoping that they might be reunited someday.

\textsuperscript{58} Yan Geling, \textit{Lu Fan Yanshi}, 270.
Yanshi embodies “home” to Wanyu because he is the only one on whom she can project the wildness and desire for freedom inside her. In other words, he sees much in her that is hidden from everybody else. Her beauty, for instance, is hidden and must be discovered: “Her beauty has to be discovered, and Yanshi has never discovered it”; Yanshi has “never carefully looked at her” and “she hasn’t let him carefully look at her face.” While Yanshi is not attracted to her at first, he cannot help noticing her beauty and tenaciousness over time. Yet he discovers her beauty not when they are together, but when he is remembering her while in prison. This further proves that Wanyu serves as his imaginary home.

She has to hide her desires because of the social, cultural role she must fill as a traditional, reserved Chinese woman but inside her is a wild, unknown, unexplored, pure body waiting to be discovered. After the couple remarries in 1986, Wanyu seems to emancipate herself fully. She jettisons her conservative self and becomes another person. She rejects clothes, for example, and remains naked all the time. This extreme emancipation of her body suggests her strong wish to escape not just the restrictions of clothing, but also the strict social protocols and rules under the Mao regime that the clothing represents. Her son, in wanting to put clothes back on her, also wants to put social restrictions back on her, but Yanshi keeps him and others away from Wanyu. With all her clothes removed from her body, her “pure, white body is emancipated” before she dies of pneumonia. While Yanshi is in prison, Wanyu exists in a prison of her own. Wanyu’s reunification with Yanshi, releases her from those restrictive controls. She sets herself free from suppressed desires once Yanshi comes back, liberating herself from the expectations of a traditional Chinese woman.

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59 Ibid., 98–9.
60 Ibid., 445.
From the above we see that Yanshi is externally outspoken and rebellious—internally he has a deep love for Wanyu and his family. Wanyu, while being quiet, gentle and obedient on the surface, secretly longs for freedom. At the same time, Wanyu holds onto an idealistic love that is based on her conceptions rather than reality. Throughout their lives, Yanshi has been absent: from when Yanshi pursues education, love and freedom abroad; to the period when Yanshi’s stepmother monopolizes his time, separating him from Wanyu; to the years Yanshi spends in prison. Yet these absences do not decrease, but rather increase, her love for him. This suggests, however, that the Yanshi that Wanyu falls in love with is not the actual man, but the image she clings to—an image that she has desired and fantasized about since she was seventeen, before she even knew Yanshi. Her desire rather represents her persistent and unconditional pursuit for an idealized, fantasized love.

Their love story in the end turns into perpetual waiting, loss, and absence. Both Lu Yanshi’s waiting and longing for his wife in the Labor Camp, and Wanyu’s waiting for her husband’s homecoming, represent the “scar” of the Cultural Revolution—turning all personal happiness—intellectual and romantic powers, physical and mental abilities, personal relationships—into tragedies. When the couple finally reunites, Wanyu has lost her memory and cannot recognize him, so that she must continue to wait for the Yanshi of her memory. Yanshi tries hard to help Wanyu remember, but at times he needs to act as if he is someone else to keep her company while she waits for Lu Yanshi, even as he is the very person she is waiting for. The Cultural Revolution’s impact on individuals thus proves devastating in both novels. Yet compared to traditional Scar literature, Yan Geling’s novel retains a final, celebratory tone because in some ways the waiting does not damage but instead strengthens the novel’s central relationship. Yanshi’s absence keeps Wanyu waiting thereby giving her hope and something to
live for. Wanyu has always been waiting for her love to come back and to reunite with her husband. Yanshi meanwhile has hope that Wanyu will recognize him, and their love will be realized.

Wanyu’s memory loss heightens the drama of the story.\(^{61}\) It shifts the waiting for reunion from Yanshi to Wanyu, and the story ends tragically with Wanyu’s death and Yanshi’s longing. Wanyu hasn’t changed her feelings for Yanshi despite their having been separated for years because of the Labor Camp Movement and the Cultural Revolution. However, her love and marriage have been devastated by the political turmoil that has caused her husband’s long absence. With her memory loss, Wanyu romanticizes her past with Yanshi. She chooses to fill her brain with fairytales of their love. To the novel’s narrator, Yanshi’s and Wanyu’s granddaughter, Wanyu’s retreat into myths that she has built around her married life is a deliberate choice, a strategy designed to change her memories. The narrator says, “I am not willing to say that she has Alzheimer’s disease because I feel she is in control of her memories and turns memories into fantasy.”\(^{62}\) Wanyu’s loss of memory is significant; how she remembers is no longer based on facts (in the political culture of the time) but is based on how she produces new memories. Under this political turmoil, certainty dissolves, and the ground shifts under one’s feet. She learns this from Yanshi’s conviction for a crime that cannot be named, based on evidence that is never presented. She doesn’t remember, but re-members, creating new memories from the actual events, forging them into something that is more stable, but also a fantasy. Wanyu retreats into her memories of the past—but those memories are actually idealizations of

\(^{61}\) It is interesting that two Chinese American writers discussed in this dissertation, Ha Jin and Yan Geling, have both written novels with Maoist China and the Cultural Revolution as the background, and that also deal with waiting and memory loss, as in Ha Jin’s *Waiting* (1999) and *The Crazed* (2002).

her time with Yanshi—necessitated both by his long absence, and the attempt to escape the trauma of his being ripped from her life. But in retreating into those false memories, and going over them repeatedly, she actually ends up reinforcing them—making the false narrative actually stronger than her recollection of the actual events.

But the loss of memory is not her isolated problem; it is caused by and affects the Party, the family and the community. Their son Ziye, has erased all possible imprints of his father for the sake of the family’s safety. Ziye’s daughter has never seen her grandfather because her father has burned all the pictures. This lack of visual reference is partly responsible for Wanyu’s inability to recognize Yanshi. And of course, years in the labor camp have left their mark on Yanshi, changing his face and physical appearance.

It shocks Wanyu that she cannot recognize Yanshi anymore. When they have dinner together and talk the whole night, she cannot recognize him because the Yanshi in her memory is so clear to her, and so different from Yanshi as he has returned. She tries to seek an image that could bridge the gap between her memory and the old man in front of her.63 The sexual harassment she has suffered at the hands of a Communist comrade also confuses her memory of her husband, and distances her from all men. The comrade’s intrusion into her private life also causes Wanyu to conflate the two men. All these forces discussed above collectively cause Wanyu to fail to recognize Yanshi after he comes out of prison.

In Wanyu’s perpetual waiting, the novel reveals the trauma suffered under the Mao regime. Suffocating in this restrictive political era, waiting becomes their survival tactic, not only in love but also in life. And yet, Wanyu dies waiting for the Yanshi of her memory to return. And

63 Ibid., 409.
though he was able to spend time with her before her death, Yanshi must live without having been recognized by Wanyu as her long lost husband.

Wanyu’s generation, those who were adults in the late 1970s, all share this waiting and disappointment. They have been waiting to be admitted to colleges, for Deng Xiaoping to resume his post, for an improving Sino-American relationship, yet they become disappointed when they finally realize these are only false hopes.  

When those things actually happen, they realize that they are not as glorious as they expect and are not solutions to their problems. Not just Wanyu and Yanshi, but their whole generation has been waiting.

These two themes, waiting and forgetting, became the focus of *Coming Home*, a 2014 film based on the novel. Directed by Zhang Yimou, the film broke domestic box office records and won the thirty-fourth Hong Kong Film Awards as Best Cross-Strait Chinese movie. Perhaps in response to censorship concerns, the film’s plot diverges from the book significantly. The novel’s title “Lu Fan Yanshi,” and the character’s name “Lu Yanshi” contain two Chinese characters that imply “land offense,” a symbol of his status in the political movement. Yet the film title was changed to “Coming Home” (gui lai, return) and the focus of the movie was changed along the same lines. While Yan’s novel spent many pages on the labor camp movement and the prisoners’ lives, the movie mentions that Yanshi is in prison but does not show any scene from his prison life. The movie shifts the attention to the couple’s love and waiting, and the hardships they experience. What is silenced and deleted deserves studying.

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64 Ibid., 411.

65 The film box office reached 295 million domestically in less than two months, more than any melodrama produced in recent years. See Baidu.com, http://www.dzwww.com/yule/yulezhuanti/yanpo/201406/t20140625_9631017.htm.
The movie also compresses the expanses of time and space in the story. The novel narrates half a century from Yanshi and Wanyu’s arranged marriage to their reunion after the long twenty-year wait, yet the movie focuses on the time they spend together after Yanshi’s return. The novel’s settings include Shanghai, Washington and Qinghai. In the movie, all the action is limited to the northern part of China. Yanshi’s foreign experience as a graduate student as well as his labor camp experiences are obliterated. Although the movie obviously cannot retain the full content of the book, the background of Yanshi’s experience as an overseas student is essential to his character, because it contrasts so strongly to his poverty in prison and after his release. When compared to his once privileged social class or his elite status as a Chinese intellectual returned from abroad, his re-education is even more harrowing. Despite the historical and political backgrounds largely being left out, the movie similarly highlights the unachievable love between the old couple. The movie leaves a number of details ambiguous, like the reasons for the shifts of Yanshi’s status and the causes of Wanyu’s memory loss. Yet if the audience pays attention and is more aware of the cultural background, they might correlate what happens between the couple with the historical trauma at the time. Although the movie cuts out huge part of the book, it still focuses on the absence of home.

In the movie the sense of home is crystalized between the couple and their relationship with their daughter. The movie has recurring scenes of Wanyu looking at the calendar, making a sign with Yanshi’s name on it, and getting up early to receive Yanshi in the train station. Audiences are brought close to her, yet invited to mourn that she will never be able to recognize her husband even when he is beside her. For years she wakes up in the early morning on the fifth of every month to go to the train station, holding up a sign she makes to receive Yanshi. Yet when Yanshi passes by, she cannot recognize him; instead she returns to her house, only to come
back the next day to continue her waiting. The movie ends when the grey-haired Wanyu is again waiting in the bus station, seeing people pass by her one after another, until the gate closes in front of her. The waiting itself contains deep love and longing for her “home”—the husband she imagines based on her vague memories. Yanshi, however, tries to keep connected to his wife by writing letters as a husband, then reading his own letters as letter-reader. The Cultural Revolution and his imprisonment distanced them but one could see his strong desire to reconnect to Wanyu by his following her, reading letters to her, and helping her with chores. In the movie, even the daughter Dantong who contributes to her mother’s forgetting of Yanshi tries to be a link and messenger between her parents when her father gets out of prison.

The absence of home presented in their love, marriage and relationship dramatizes the emotional void during the Mao era, and reinforces the restricted emotional spheres of life under the Maoist regime. Politics and nation are irreconcilable with family and marriage, and people like Yanshi and Wanyu find it difficult, if not impossible, to generate a sense of home under these conditions.

3. **Staging Revolution in the Mao Era—*A Woman’s Epic***

Compared to *Criminal Lu Yanshi*, Yan Geling’s earlier novel about the revolutionary times governed by the Communist Party, *A Woman’s Epic* (2006), presents a much happier ending, as the couple not only survives the political changes but also reunites in the end. The novel features a tragic but heroic woman, Tian Sufei, whose outstanding purity and kindheartedness overshadow political struggles and her husband’s neglect. From the early 1950s to early 1980s, Tian persists in her love for a revolutionary intellectual, Ouyang Yu. During a
series of Communist political campaigns, the outspoken revolutionary Ouyang is denounced several times and sent down to the countryside and prison, yet Tian Sufei (nicknamed Xiaofei) stands by him without complaint. Despite an imbalance of attention in the relationship, Xiaofei holds on to her own love and her devotion and wifely virtue win Ouyang’s affection and love in the end.

In *A Woman’s Epic*, most of the characters adhere closely to Communist ideology, subsuming their individual identity to the collective and giving their loyalty to the political unit over their families. This loyalty persists whether or not the characters have an understanding of the Party’s policies and despite those policies and ideals frequently shifting and changing. The novel reveals Communist ideology to be disturbingly unstable, an illusion under which loyalties and judgments about those loyalties are tied to an arbitrary standard that is also constantly changing. This turns the Communist ideologues into something like performers, loudly proclaiming their lines, almost like actors on a stage—actors being judged by how faithfully they stick to the script, and how passionately they read their lines.

Whether from ignorance or indifference, Xiaofei doesn’t care about any political campaigns. Instead, she is loyal only to her own profession as an actress and her romantic feelings. While this leads to some questionable choices, ultimately she is the only character in the novel who survives the political turmoil while also managing to construct an emotional “home” through her romantic love. In the novel’s formulations, only other people, only a loving relationship, can provide a sense of home—not faith in any political ideology or social movement.

When they are both young, Xiaowu, Xiaofei’s best friend, encourages her to learn about Communism, and to join the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and the Party itself. Xiaowu
persists in her revolutionary ideals and follows Communism very strictly. When she finds out that her father has been selling counterfeit drugs to the PLA, she not only disavows him as her father, but also writes a play with her husband about the incident, a play that criticizes capitalists. For Xiaowu, her father’s mistake is unforgivable because his fabricated medicine harms the army. Although her anger seems reasonable, her extreme reactions show that in her mind the collective good should always outweigh the individual’s. When he is sent to prison, for instance, she joins the Army in condemning both him and her mother. Without hesitating, Xiaowu prioritizes politics and the collective over family, however close the family member is to her. When her husband is later demoted and categorized as a Rightist during the Anti-Rightist Movement, she divorces him immediately. Her husband is later exonerated and his reputation cleared; he refuses, however, to reunite with Xiaowu and instead marries another woman. He cannot forgive her for her lack of loyalty to and trust in him. One by one, shifting Party policies estrange Xiaowu from all of her close relationships—first her parents, and then Lao Liu, her husband, even though he was an equal partner in their early revolutionary fervor. In the end, Xiaowu’s idealistic faith in and devotion to Communism and the Party leaves her alone, a single mother, raising a child that does not seem to be close to her.

Members of Xiaofei’s drama troupe are also conscious of revolutionary ideals and strive to work for the Communist cause. They seem to be clear about what is right or wrong in the Communist vocabulary. Even a term like “Miss” would be offensive to a fellow in the drama troupe Ma Dan because it’s often associated with the bourgeoisie. Another fellow in the drama troupe, Mr. Chen, works hard to become a Communist leader. When Xiaofei’s husband Ouyang

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66 Yan Geling, *Yige nüren de shishi* 一個女人的史詩 [A woman’s epic] (Taipei: Jiuge Chubanshe, 2007), 111.
67 Ibid., 42.
is denounced as a capitalist, Chen asks her to be “more mature in politics” and “draw a clear line between herself and Ouyang,” and even teaches Xiaofei how to defend herself from public accusations, explaining, “you should say that you and Ouyang belong to two different classes, so for many years you’ve not got along well, and that his capitalist lifestyle and his counter-revolutionary talk disgust you.” Chen attempts to persuade Xiaofei to remain politically beyond reproach so that she can maintain her position as the troupe’s main actress, which would increase his chances of getting promoted. His advice is strategic, and he has learned to play the political game in order to succeed in the system. Later in the novel he becomes the leader of the drama troupe. Both Xiaowu and Mr. Chen see their positions in and contributions to the Communist party as being essential to their lives and defining their social value.

The men Xiaofei is involved with are as closely connected to Communist ideas as her friends are. The two men in Xiaofei’s love life, Commander Du and Ouyang, represent two extremes of revolutionary activists. Commander Du, an honorable and respected leader in the army, who appreciates Xiaofei’s talent for acting, is both fond of her and concerned about her well-being. Du leads by example, being a dedicated soldier with extensive combat experience. In the end he dies of lung disease caused by fragments of a bullet that lodged in his lung. Du’s sincere affection for Xiaofei often leads him to guard her safety. During the Land Reform (1950–1951) he goes to the front line for a battle and keeps her away from fighting so as to ensure her safety. Even when he doesn’t marry Xiaofei as he wishes to, he continues to support her plays by sending his soldiers to aid her; he also sends her necessities and food during the Great Famine.

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68 Ibid., 243.
69 “Law of Land Reform of the People’s Republic of China” was promulgated in 1950s, and the basic measure in this policy was “to confiscate the land of the landlord class and to redistribute it to peasants having insufficient or no land.” See T. H. Shen, Agricultural Resources of China, 98.
When Xiaofei’s daughter is insulted because her father is categorized as a Rightist and imprisoned, Du helps to send her to military training. Du is thus portrayed as a loyal, passionate soldier, while also occupying a position of high, unshakable authority. He is the only character, for example, who remains unaffected by changes in Communist and government policies. But even that certainty is fleeting, for when Du dies, Xiaofei no longer enjoys his protection, and is once again vulnerable to the vicissitudes of shifting political winds.

Practically and politically, Commander Du should have been the perfect choice for Xiaofei. Despite his attractive personality and both Xiaofei’s friends’ and her mother’s wish for her to marry Commander Du, Xiaofei chooses to follow her heart and marry Ouyang. Xiaofei’s rejection of Du’s love shows that she does not take official ranking or material wealth into consideration when choosing her own partner. Although admiring Commander Du and appreciating his help, Xiaofei is dedicated to Ouyang alone.

Commander Du’s admiration for Xiaofei, however, mostly arises from her performances in the roles of various revolutionary heroines. He first finds himself attracted to her when she is acting on the stage, and later takes a number of his soldiers to see her plays in order to learn “revolutionary passion” and the “feelings of workers and peasants.”70 Her emotions and passions on the stage often drive Commander Du to tears. To a great extent, his admiration for her mostly stems from the image she projects on stage—a heroine who embodies the working class. His love for her is a way of achieving his romantic ideals of serving the public, the working classes and the revolution during the Mao era.

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70 Yan Geling, *Yige nüren de shishi*, 54.
In stark contrast, the man Xiaofei unconditionally loves, Ouyang, embodies the free spirited, brave, pure revolutionary who pursues his own political ideals and insists on pure Marxist ideology. Although he is a strong believer in Communism, he does not follow or blindly agree with policies that seem to change almost daily. He hates extreme class struggles and does not believe that they have to involve violence.\(^{71}\) Hostile to authority, Ouyang rebels against misinterpretations of political ideals and strives instead to work for the public, condemning the corruption, bribery and lies that destroy citizens’ futures.\(^{72}\) He is deeply concerned with the life of the masses so he willingly goes to the grass-root cultural units\(^{73}\) to guide their cultural development.\(^{74}\) For him, political ideals and the well-being of the public are even more important than his own family. He becomes a revolutionary, for instance, over his father’s objections, and persists even after his father cuts off contact with him. He is hopeful about cultural re-education and wants to contribute to the course of cultural development during the Communist era.

An idealistic Communist and Revolutionary, Ouyang becomes an idol for a number of women. Many, including the liberal intellectual Lily, Xiaofei’s colleague in the drama troupe, and a poet who works with Ouyang, fall in love with him. He represents a kind of freedom and recklessness that is still attached to Communist ideals but rejects the bureaucracy. These women’s attention to him seems to show that a pure, passionate Communist, one who does not strictly follow Communist policies blindly, is very attractive. Casting Ouyang as many women’s

\(^{71}\) Ibid., 64.
\(^{72}\) Ibid., 157.
\(^{73}\) Grass-roots units include township government agencies, rural primary and secondary schools, township hospitals, family planning service stations, etc.
\(^{74}\) Yan Geling, *Yige nüren de shishi*, 123.
ideal lover reveals the desires that were suppressed during the Mao era, when political correctness and matching social status become the prerequisite for all relationships.

Meanwhile, the ideal lover for Ouyang is an outcast in the Communist society just like himself. This mysterious lover—Lily (Sun Baihe) — does not follow standard political ideals. His love for her does not stop even after he marries Xiaofei. At one point, he buys Xiaofei the coat that his lover wears, and makes a long, black scarf for her neck, seemingly wanting to transform her into a woman like his lover.\textsuperscript{75} Xiaofei feels sad since she knows Ouyang’s heart is not with her but someone else, someone very different from her. Ouyang gives up his love because of Xiaofei’s pregnancy, but in his heart he is still chasing the ideal woman. In Xiaofei’s analysis of Ouyang, the real figure of love in his heart is always absent, and he is trying to piece together various parts from different women to create the ideal lover.\textsuperscript{76} After Xiaofei encounters Lily, she feels scared because Lily embodies what Ouyang desires — intelligence, elegance and maturity: “She and her actions embody all the literature and poetry.”\textsuperscript{77} Besides the literary interests Lily shares with him, Ouyang’s love for her confirms his ideals as a rebel against the norms of Communism. Both Ouyang and Lily have are fiercely independent, a trait that distinguishes them from many others in the novel. Yet the fact that they are portrayed as favored people shows the novel’s embrace of their anti-conformity at a time when everyone was asked to obey Communist rule. Ouyang and Lily fill the emptiness in each other’s life—as both of them defy authority and the power of the government while clinging to love and knowledge.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 82.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 128.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 102.
Lily and Ouyang cannot be together but the absence of togetherness fills Ouyang with romantic notions. The narrator explains, “Ouyang Yu could find beauty in tragedies, the absence/imperfection fills him with poetic feelings… In spirit he is an eternal rebel, in his heart he is yielding.” In fact the rebellious personality is not limited to Ouyang but also applies to Xiaofei. While Ouyang pursues someone who shares his political ideals and literary interests, Xiaofei chases him despite his neglect of her. Xiaofei falls in love with Ouyang at first sight and pursues him actively. Shortly after they meet, Xiaofei returns a book to him, leaving a note in the book stating her will to marry him. But in their marriage his love is absent. He does not support her career and rarely sees her act. Even when the couple is struggling financially, he invites guests home or to his office for poetry discussions and treats them to dinner, or goes out with female friends for literary inspiration. Once he dates a female poet without realizing or considering how hurtful it is to Xiaofei. He often tells her honestly about his interests in other women. Yet Xiaofei works hard in order to make enough money to provide food and drink for his guests. Even when Xiaofei is six months pregnant, she tries to conceal the baby with her costumes and keeps acting on stage. By doing so she puts the baby and her own health at risk, but she does that in order to protect her husband and herself from being charged with having sex before marriage. She always prioritizes her marriage and husband over herself and her own well-being.

Her love for him is unconditional. But her love is silly, even in her daughter’s eyes: it’s a love that tortures others and herself. In her relationship with Ouyang, Xiaofei often feels like a

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78 Ibid., 122.
79 Ibid., 49.
80 Ibid., 122.
guest. The author spends several pages describing Xiaofei’s imagination of a sexual intrusion in her house after she is back from traveling with the acting troupe. She is suspicious whenever she goes home from work—she looks for the scent of other women every time her husband returns home. Such incidents portray her insecurity in the relationship, which causes her to feel like a guest instead of a host in her own home. And to her this is tragic. She runs away from home at the age of sixteen hoping to get away from her dark, small hometown and her abusive mother. Away from her family and mother, she first tries to find her home in the revolutionary community and then in her affectionate relationship with Ouyang. That relationship is unbalanced until the end of the story—when Ouyang finally yields to her unconditional and persistent love. The difficult time they endure ultimately does bring them closer to each other: “She thinks about a strange sentence again: If not for a revolution with its cruelty, how could they reach this height of love? Cruelty lies here: extreme disappointment equals extreme romance.”

Ouyang’s lifetime devotion to all Communist ideology leads him to misery—being criticized in the political campaigns, being put in prison during the Anti-Rightist movement. In the end he comes to realize the only stability available to him is his marriage and family.

Although Xiaofei’s love for him is mostly one-sided, Xiaofei shares some similarities with Ouyang—concern for the public and resistance against blind faith in politics. When a friend of theirs is criticized and sent to prison, instead of cutting ties with him she pushes officials to investigate his case. Xiaofei is even sympathetic towards her love rival. When she sees Lily’s growing insanity, Xiaofei wants to protect her from all outside dangers. When Xiaofei goes on

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81 Ibid., 103.
82 Ibid., 242.
83 Ibid., 260.
tour she experiences life in factories and farms. Xiaofei shares Ouyang’s dedication to public service.

However, unlike Ouyang, Xiaofei is ignorant of politics and political ideals even though she plays Communist heroes on stage. When she first joins the army with her friend Xiaowu, she has no idea what revolution is and only joins in order to escape her mother’s beatings. Many times in the novel, the people around her, including her friend Xiaowu and her admirer and colleague Mr. Chen, point out her lack of political awareness. Unaware of political policies, she is much more concerned about the people affected by the political movements. Once when the wife of a landlord talks to her, she almost bursts into empathetic tears even though landlords were considered “bad elements” at the time.\(^{84}\) She almost sees herself as a traitor because she cannot yield to the cause of the revolution when she sees how people are suffering from it.

Ironically, however, as ignorant of politics, revolution and Communism as she is, Xiaofei embodies the ideal revolutionary heroine on stage: young, beautiful, passionate and energetic. She often acts as the heroine in revolutionary theater such as *Liu Hulan* \(^{85}\) and the *White Haired Girl* (Bai maonü 白毛女), \(^{86}\) as well as playing foreign heroines in Russian plays. Ouyang comments that Xiaofei should not overuse her emotions, but he also understands the exaggeration of emotions is related to class emotions.\(^{87}\) These plays that Xiaofei performs in are aimed at motivating soldiers fighting on the ground, so the plays must employ strong emotions as

\(^{84}\) Ibid., 66.

\(^{85}\) *Liu Hulan* was a young female spy during the Chinese Civil War between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party. She actively supported the Communist Party of China and was involved in a number of activities such as supplying food to the communist Army, and mending boots and uniforms.

\(^{86}\) The White-haired girl is the main protagonist in the classic opera created in 1945, which has been adapted into film in 1950 and ballet in 1965. She represents the resistant spirit of laboring people.

\(^{87}\) Yan Geling, *Yige nüren de shishi*, 27.
a strategy. Revolutionaries who fight in the class struggle need to be upright, passionate and courageous. Xiaofei naturally embodies these characteristics without any pretense, attracting common people and the powerful few alike, in this case her male colleagues and Commander Du. When she speaks in her loud voice and puts her chest out, Xiaofei’s explosion of energy and emotions could well express the passion for revolution and the working class of the time, including Commander Du’s. Later people in the military call Xiaofei “the pioneer of revolution” because of her years’ experience in the military acting troupe.\textsuperscript{88} Despite how her acting contributes to Communist propaganda, the narrator explains that her work is not intended to establish her career or to follow the Party’s call but simply to provide food for her family.\textsuperscript{89} By going into her thoughts the narrative in the novel exposes us to Xiaofei’s naivety about the roles she plays on stage. In reality Xiaofei is quite unaware of her social responsibilities as a Communist and a revolutionary.

The stage is a site where she connects to political ideals. While people around her seem to participate actively in the revolution, she is a passive participant since she only engages with revolutionary dialogue on the stage. In that sense her political engagement is truly “performed”—taking place within the context of a fictional drama. By contrast, the people around her are also “performing” the revolution, but are doing so in real life. The novel presents an analogy between life and the stage: “For more than ten years’ on the stage there’ve been so many aspects of human nature displayed. Nations and countries became victims. Only literati benefit from it.”\textsuperscript{90} If Xiaofei is the winner in the story, the one who survives, then others lose

\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 241.  
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 294.  
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 217.
because the stage they act on—revolution—is neither stable nor reliable. Xiaofei’s emotions on
the stage appear to be genuine, but they serve a fictionalized narrative. Xiaofei’s emotions on
stage stay true, while the stage mobilizes fiction to serve the purpose of revolution, Xiaofei’s true
love for Ouyang is honest and stable while marriages are only supposed to serve the collective
under the Mao regime.

Just as in the novel *The Criminal Lu Yanshi*, “revolution” has lost its meaning. It has been
interpreted and re-interpreted so many times that no one can grasp its real meaning. Mao’s social
movements, including the Chinese Civil War, Land Reform, the Anti-Rightist Movement, the
Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution, have continuously challenged people’s
ideology and values. Beliefs and people that are at one time valorized are determined to be
wrong at other times. Policies are supposed to work for the collective not for individuals, and
revolutionaries are supposed to be selflessly working for the people. But most of the time
“revolution” becomes an empty term, and people take advantage of others in order to save their
own lives.

The novel’s construction of Xiaofei as a heroine makes those active participants in
revolution seem naive. The title of the book, *A Woman’s Epic*, implies the author’s glorification
of Xiaofei. The word “epic” compares the story with heroic epics in literary history like *The Iliad*
and *The Odyssey*. The novel crowns Xiaofei as an exceptional and admirable heroine She
remains a strong and persistent lover even when she is insecure and scared; she is concerned
about others’ well-being and goes out of her way to help. But unlike *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*
which feature male characters as heroes, *A Woman’s Epic* clearly focuses on Xiaofei and not on
her husband, showing her love to be one of her essential heroic qualities. Compared to Wanyu
and Yanshi in *The Criminal Lu Yanshi* whose love is suppressed by politics, Xiaofei is a success.
She pursues and marries Ouyang, becoming a heroine who finally wins her own love. In the irreconcilable relationship between nation/politics and family/marriage in The Criminal Lu Yanshi, becomes an impossibility; however, in A Woman’s Epic eventually Xiaofei and Ouyang are able to regain their family and love after the political turmoil. Xiaofei’s innocence turns into a happy ending with her husband at the end of the story.

The novel critiques Maoist politics by portraying the tragedies of those who seek their sense of belonging through the Communist Party and who blindly follow Party politics. The hero and heroine in the novel defy the political ideals of the time: Ouyang resists the negatives brought by politics and pursues his own revolutionary ideals; Xiaofei acts as revolutionary heroine on stage, but in real life she neglects politics and focuses on her own emotions and love; Lily is regarded as “politically incorrect” because of her free-spirited, liberal soul yet becomes an imagined love of Ouyang. She leads a lonely life in the end. Commander Du ends up dying from a bullet that has long remained in his lung for years. Xiaowu separates from her husband and remains alone. By depicting the tragedies of those who have followed the Party policies, the novel questions whether the Mao regime could secure the sense of “home” as it promised.

The film production of The Criminal Lu Yanshi and the TV series made from A Woman’s Epic show that these two could be easily read as touching stories of sustaining love through hardships. Their ability to depict political topics and ultimately offer a political critique—while seemingly being apolitical—makes Yan Geling’s works even more interesting. The popularity of her works and their media adaptations are largely due to the fact that people who experienced the times can easily empathize with her characters and subject matter. Beyond that, it is the hidden message in her works that has been uncovered in this chapter.
Chapter Three

Longing for and Resistance Against Home: Contemporary Sinophone Immigrant Writings

Despite recent academic interest, contemporary Sinophone Chinese immigrant writings\(^1\) (Dangdai Zhongguo yimin Huawen wenxue 當代中國移民華文文學) largely remains a missing chapter from both Chinese American and Sinophone studies. Compared to Chinese American literary discourse which began in the 1960s, Sinophone Chinese immigrant writings in the United States have received far less attention from American academics. One of the few prominent studies on Chinese overseas students, Chih-ming Wang’s *Transpacific Articulations: Student Migration and the Remaking of Asian America* (2013), traces the history of “overseas student literature” from the 1920s to the 1980s, examining both Anglophone and Sinophone overseas Chinese student writings. Despite its contribution to bridging Asian American and Sinophone studies, this work mostly considers its subject from a social-historical perspective.\(^2\)

Much like Wang’s work, Sau-ling Cynthia Wong’s essay “Chinese American literature” in *An__

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1 There have been scholarly debates about the term. These writings could be called “haiwai huaren wenxue” (海外華人文學, overseas literature by Chinese) or “haiwai huawen wenxue” (海外華文文學, overseas literature in Chinese). For debates about these two terms please see p. 8–9 of this dissertation. Some scholars call these writings “xin yimin wenxue” (新移民文學, new immigrant literature), which specifically refers to writings by immigrants who go abroad after the “reform and opening up” policy raised in 1978 in China. The word “Sinophone” in my usage is neutral and simply refers to the Chinese language.

Inter-Ethnic Companion to Asian American Literature (1997) focuses on Sinophone Chinese student writings\(^3\) prior to the 1980s and similarly classifies these works as Asian American literature. By doing so, these and other studies overlook the personal and individual experiences of Chinese immigrants, experiences that shape their construction of “home” and their identities. Similarly, existing scholarship on Sinophone studies has largely focused on Southeast Asia, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, and has placed less emphasis on Sinophone writings in Western countries.\(^4\) Although contemporary Sinophone Chinese immigrant writings have not yet reached a broad audience, they still constitute an important part of overseas Chinese student literature and immigrant literature. By focusing on new Sinophone immigrant writings from the 1990s onward, this chapter hopes to fill a gap in existing Chinese immigrant studies in Western scholarship.

This chapter focuses on contemporary Sinophone Chinese immigrant writings that have been published in Mainland China, targeting Mainland Chinese readers rather than overseas Chinese. Therefore these works follow the trend of contemporary Chinese literature in the post-Mao era—the commercialization of literature.\(^5\) As Chapter 2 has shown, Yan Geling avails herself of commercial tactics in the narrative and marketing of her work. Her works are often adapted as TV series or movies, which has helped to fuel her success. Although writing largely about the Mainland, Yan Geling became famous early on with her novel The Lost Daughter of Happiness (Fusang 扶桑, 1996) which focuses on a female Chinese immigrant’s difficult life in

\(^3\) Here I mainly refer to overseas Chinese student writings in the 1960s and 70s as discussed in the first chapter.

\(^4\) For more detailed review of scholarship on Sinophone studies, refer to the Introduction of this dissertation.

San Francisco. This novel successfully brings the “yellow peril”\(^6\) stories back to the Sinophone regions—Taiwan, Hong Kong and China at a time when such stories were popular in the United States.\(^7\) While this novel follows the struggles of immigrants, other Chinese immigrant writers sell to the motherland stories of their successful lives abroad. A typical example is *Harvard Girl Liu Yiting: A Chronicle of Quality Education* (*Hafó nühai Liu Yiting: Suzhi jiaoyu peiyang jishi* 哈佛女孩劉亦婷—素質教育培養紀實) published in 2000, which became an instant bestseller in China. Chih-ming Wang claims this book as “not only the old American Dream repackaged in the new story of transpacific upward mobility, but also a neo-liberal ideology, manifested in the quest for quality and excellence.”\(^8\) Social and economic development in China has drawn readers to stories that promise a bright future and upward mobility. Whether they depict difficult diasporic experiences or success immigrant stories, both *The Lost Daughter of Happiness* and *Harvard Girl Liu Yiting* have fed the commercializing trend of the contemporary Chinese literary scene with their immigrant tales.

This commercialization of Chinese immigrant literature has emerged under the changing historical background of Chinese immigration. Chinese immigrants coming to the United States before the 20th Century were mostly a poor and uneducated labor force. This changed somewhat at the turn of the 20th Century when a number of May Fourth intellectuals went abroad to receive a Western liberal education in hopes of bringing advanced knowledge back to China and

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6. This is a racial metaphor to signify Asians as threat to the West.

7. Since the publication of this book some Chinese immigrant writings have emerged that focus on the experiences of first-generation Chinese immigrants in the United States. Some examples include Ha Jin’s *A Free Life* (2007) and Jean Kwok’s *Girl in Translation* (2010). However, this phenomenon is not new in Chinese American literary history. Chinese American writers like Louis Chu, Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan have written about stories about first- and second-generation Chinese Americans since the 1960s.

contributing to the nation’s modernization project.\(^9\) Not long after the Immigrant Act of 1917 was issued,\(^10\) banning all immigrants from many parts of Asia including parts of China. Soon the Immigration Act of 1924 prevented most Chinese from coming to the States for any purpose. The quota system established by the 1924 Act\(^11\) was eliminated in 1965. Starting from that point, a large number of Chinese came to the United States over the next two decades, with the largest groups coming from Taiwan and Hong Kong, although many of them were originally from Mainland China.\(^12\) The goal of pursuing foreign knowledge and contributing to the modernization of their homeland continued to be important to the new wave of immigrants during the 1960s and 1970s. The trend of educated immigrants coming from Taiwan in those years was followed by a wave of educated immigrants coming from Mainland China in the 1980s and onward, partially a result of the “Reform and Opening Up” (since 1978) led by Deng Xiaoping encouraging cultural and economic exchanges with foreign countries. Restrictions on Chinese immigrants were further reduced in the 1990s, encouraging a highly skilled, educated work force to travel to or move to the United States on a large scale.\(^13\)

\[^9\] Some famous modern intellectuals who went abroad include Hu Shi (to America), Cai Yuanpei (to Germany), Lu Xun, Chen Duxiu, Zhou Zuoren, Guo Moruo, Yu Dafu (to Japan), and Xu Zhimo (to UK).

\[^10\] It was the first bill aimed at restricting immigrants. This act lists the undesirables and bans them from entering the country, including “illiterates,” “political radicals” etc. See “Provisions of the 1917 Law,” accessed Jan 17, 2018, https://web.archive.org/web/20151122000936/http://immigrationtounitedstates.org/588-immigration-act-of-1917.html.


\[^12\] Because the Cultural Revolution took place during 1966 to 1976, not many immigrants were coming from Mainland China.

These shifts in Chinese immigration have been accompanied by shifts in immigrants’ sentiments. The national sentiment that occupied overseas Chinese students in the 1960s and 70s has slowly dissipated among the new immigrants who left China in the 1980s and later. Instead of an obsession with, and a hope to return and contribute to, their homeland (baoxiao zuguo 報效祖國), new overseas Chinese students go abroad more for personal pursuits and improvement. Overseas education transformed from being a way of bringing intellectual and financial capital back to their homeland to benefit the nation, to a way of building personal capital, which Chih-ming Wang calls “a form of flexible capital accumulation.” In this way, the new Chinese immigrants have shifted their focus from collective, national concerns to personal, individual pursuits.

These personal and individual impulses can be found throughout contemporary Chinese immigrant literature from the 1990s and onward. Although contemporary Chinese immigrant literature carries on several themes from earlier Chinese immigrant writings—fascination with and celebration of the American dream; the negotiation of cultural differences; nostalgia for the homeland; defining and re-defining terms like Chinese immigrant, Chinese diaspora and Chinese American—contemporary Sinophone Chinese immigrant writings locate and ground these themes in personal desires and sentiments. Romantic love, in particular, becomes a mechanism through which the diasporic subjects in these novels constitute their identities and conjure up the sense of “home” in their diasporic experience. The experience of deracination and alienation that migratory subjects experience is paralleled in both their romantic relationships and their

14 See Chih-ming Wang, Transpacific Articulations, 137.
experience as Chinese immigrants. Love, composed of giving, giving up and abandonment, mirrors the departures, arrivals and resettlements in a diasporic journey.

The romantic stories in contemporary Sinophone Chinese immigrant writings not only mirror the complex identity politics in Chinese diasporic subjects, but also represent a shift to more personal and individual accounts in Chinese immigrant literature. This chapter, by examining the trope of romantic love in contemporary Chinese immigrant novels, including Shi Yu’s *New York Lover* (2004), Xue Haixiang’s *Good Morning America* (1988) and Rong Rong’s *Notes of a Couple* (2004), asks what are the struggles of identity formulation for contemporary Chinese immigrant subjects, and how do they re-construct the new sense of “home”?

1. Nostalgic Love in Shi Yu’s *New York Lover*

Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as “a sentiment of loss and displacement” while also being “a romance with one’s own fantasy.” Boym distinguishes two types of nostalgia: restorative, which “stresses nóstos (home) and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home;” and “reflective,” which “thrives in álgos, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming—wistfully, ironically, desperately.” The former highlights the past, the origin, the truth, and the homeland; whereas the latter “dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging.” The texts examined in this chapter demonstrate both types of nostalgia: while the diasporic characters long for a reconstruction of a lost home and love in their lives, they also

16 Ibid., 13.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
distance their lovers and homes in order to delay the homecoming and sustain the longing. Because of spatial and temporal distances, they are unable to protect their memories of their homeland, or the myths they have created around it, from the disorientation of their new life experiences. Although Boym uses nostalgic love to describe the diaspora’s relationship to homeland, the concept can also be applied to interpersonal relationships.

When Boym argues that “nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship,”\(^{19}\) she highlights the important roles of both distance and fantasy. Individuals’ long-distance relationships with either people or places create a nostalgic love for someone or somewhere that no longer exists, or never has existed in the nostalgic form that it takes. In the contemporary Chinese immigrant novels discussed below, the protagonists create distance from their lovers in order to sustain the longing in their relationships. Distance makes their love impossible and unfulfilled; these very qualities strengthen their connection to the object of desire. Entering into a diasporic state voluntarily, therefore, becomes a defense mechanism or survival tactic to sustain longing and desire in relationships both to people and to homeland.

One example of nostalgic love is Shi Yu’s *New York Lover* (2004). Shi Yu graduated from Fujian Medical University in 1988 before moving to the United States in 1989. After earning a medical degree in the U.S., she worked at the Dartmouth Medical School, the Southwest Medical Center in Texas College, and a New York downtown hospital for eleven years. She is known for “abandoning her medical career for literature.”\(^ {20}\) Shi Yu not only believes in the value of saving people through literature instead of medicine, but also uses her

\(^{19}\) Ibid.

medical background in her writing. In her 2004 novel *New York Lover*, Shi Yu says in the afterword, “because I was a doctor, every person and detail I write in this story is familiar.” Set in a hospital, the novel engages existential questions of life and death. Presently she specializes in literary creative writing, and serves as the head of the Wenxin literary circle, the editor-in-chief of *Literary Mind* (*Wenxin* 文心), and an invited dean at Beijing Writers’ College. She is a columnist for *The China Press* (*Qiao bao* 僑報), *Ming Pao* (*Ming bao* 明報) and *Sing Tao Daily* (*Xingdao ribao* 星島日報). Some of her representative works include novels *Blind Spot under the Blade* (*Daofengxia de mangdian* 刀鋒下的盲點, 2006), *New York Lover* (*Niuyue qingren* 紐約情人, 2004), and *Inner City Emergency Room* (*Xiacheng jizhenshi* 下城急診室, 2011); essay collections *American Son Chinese Mother* (*Meiguo erzi Zhongguo niang* 美國兒子中國娘, 2003), *Growing up in the US* (*Meiguo de yizhong chengzhang* 美國的一種成長, 2003); and a collection of poetry *Sleepless Shore* (*Wumian de an* 無眠的岸, 2004).

*New York Lover* narrates the romances of a beautiful female doctor, He Xiaohan. The story opens with great promise, beautiful scenes in the city of New York and passionate romance. The novel’s opening highlights the paradox of the city: filled with opportunities that are transient. It also introduces the protagonist Xiaohan as a romantic, young, female doctor, newly arrived in the United States, and eager to find love. Back in China, she had a serious relationship with an intelligent and skilled surgeon, Dr. Gao. This novel reveals this romance in flashbacks. Yet her insecurity with him and his previous marriage doom their relationship. Escaping the disappointment of her relationship in China and hoping to find a romantic partner

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in the U.S., Xiaohan comes to the States to pursue a doctoral degree in medicine. America is described as a nation that “loves fantasy and is ready for adventures.” She hopes to start a new life in New York, but her first attempt at a relationship fails when a man she begins to love turns out to be gay. She eventually develops a romantic relationship with Dr. Shi, who reminds her of Dr. Gao in China. However, not long after the romance begins, she disappears in the tumultuous aftermath of the 9/11 disaster. The ashes and darkness of the novel’s end strongly contrasts with the beauty of its beginning. In the concluding scene, her friend Kevin plays Kenny G’s “Returning Home” beside Xiaohan’s graduation photo.

The novel establishes Xiaoan, who is both tough and confident, as a woman searching for independence and control in her life. Despite her humble background, she has high self-esteem that borders on arrogance. Back in China when she first writes a death report in a literary rather than scientific style, she assumes that her supervisor, Dr. Gao, will be impressed, even though he expects a report written in plain language. Professionally, she strives to be independent. This drive for independence extends to Xiaoan’s relationships; she prefers control to manipulation and submission. When she hears that Dr. Gao comes from a rich family and has been spoiled, and that he arranges for her to be his student in order to seduce her, she distances herself from him, developing a mistrust of everybody in the hospital. She only feels comfortable in relationships that she can control. In New York, for instance, she often goes to shows, museums and galleries with her friend Kevin, and openly shares her opinions with him. Gradually, Xiaoan finds Kevin to be a gentleman of taste and good manners. She feels

22 Ibid., 77.
23 Ibid., 103.
comfortable with him, as does not put any pressure on her or cause insecurity\textsuperscript{24}: “He is the best audience when Xiaohan needs to talk; he is a good rival when she needs to argue; when Xiaohan needs silence, he remains quiet,” and his company provides a quiet, implicit intimacy.\textsuperscript{25} He helps her preserve her independence because, as a gay man, a physical relationship between the two of them is never a possibility. He enhances the meaning of her life and their relationship gives her the freedom and independence that she seeks.

Yet vulnerability lies underneath Xiaohan’s independent spirit. This appears in her approach to her work, which is typified by ambition and deep emotion, a combination that Yu portrays as paradoxical and rare in the field of medicine. For example, Xiaohan feels extreme empathy for the suffering and deaths of her patients. The lost lives she must witness every day in the hospital weigh on her. When a nurse weeps over the death of a friend, Xiaohan becomes affected by her emotions: “The pen in Xiaohan’s hand shivers, her eyes linger on this dead student’s face.”\textsuperscript{26} When Xiaohan later tells a mother about the death of her daughter, Xiaohan cannot hold back her tears when seeing the mother’s sadness and fear. Her colleague jokingly summarizes the quandary of an overly emotional physician: “We are emergency doctors for a lifetime, how could you survive if you are so emotional?”\textsuperscript{27} Xiaohan’s sensitivity positions her as an outlier among the medical professionals who deal with life and death every day. This even causes Xiaohan to question her life and her profession: “When my own life is so fragile, how

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{24}] Ibid., 32.
\item[\textsuperscript{25}] Ibid., 133.
\item[\textsuperscript{26}] Ibid., 84.
\item[\textsuperscript{27}] Ibid., 174.
\end{itemize}
could I give others light and support.” She may be fragile, but what makes her special is her awareness of her own fragility.

Rather than portraying this fragility as weakness, Shi Yu portrays it as a special kind of awareness. Indeed, by casting Xiaohan as a doctor who deals with life and death in an emergency room, Shi Yu is able to employ Xiaohan as a thoughtful and insightful observer of society. And the detailed descriptions of her empathetic emotions directly challenge the moral values of that society. The third-person narrative distances the readers from the protagonist Xiaohan and often provides a detailed guide to her emotions, at times entering into her thoughts, at times commenting on her emotions. Using phrases like “Xiaohan never felt so upset as she does now,” or “Xiaohan…has not recovered from her own emotions,” the narrator provides a guide to Xiaohan’s emotions. The third person omniscient narrative helps illustrate and dramatize the sensitivity of Xiaohan.

Xiaohan appears to be both strong and weak at the same time. Her job at the emergency center requires her to be attentive and alert to patients’ needs. Yet, at the same time, she is vulnerable and sentimental. Xiaohan’s medical expertise and her complicated relationships with men show the paradox of her sensitivity and sensibility. In the hospital she is a keen observer and savior of patients who are on the verge of death, but in relationships she is vulnerable. She takes control of her professional life but emotionally she yields to the men in the novel. All her life Xiaohan makes her own choices—leaving Dr. Gao in China, coming to the United States for her career, working in an emergency room. Xiaohan treasures her freedom and is proud of making

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28 Ibid., 129.
29 Ibid., 105.
30 Ibid., 129.
her own choices, yet she is not completely self-sufficient. The novel presents her as an emotional woman who tries to find a sense of belonging among the men she comes across. However, most of her choices in love fail to give her happiness and fulfillment. The only time she achieves true love and deep concern perhaps without knowing it is with Dr. Shi Jie near the end of the novel, when Shi Jie anxiously looks for her after 9/11. It is almost as if she chooses to remain uncommitted—thus leaving herself in the conundrum of her ability to make her own choice.

America signifies hope for Xiaohan in the beginning but suggests disappointment and despondence in the end. The disaster that takes her and the world by surprise on 9/11 robs her of any free choice. By the end of the novel we are not yet given a clear resolution regarding her disappearance. She may have died in the 9/11 disaster, which would reaffirm the fragility of life, something she often observes in the hospital; or rather, she may have run away in the chaos just as she ran away from Gao. By creating distance from her lovers and her homeland, Xiaohan imagines herself to be regaining control of her relationships. Yet, if we interpret her action as fleeing, she only puts herself in a continuous loop of waiting.

Earlier in the novel, Xiaohan attends the play *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett, and the narrator explains that her situation in life also exemplifies “waiting”: “The play is very simple but also profound. Until this moment, Xiaohan didn’t know much, but today she begins to understand. Isn’t her life made up of waiting now? When one is in a foreign land, isn’t this waiting? Waiting for a relationship that is fated to be over, but which lingers on because no judge has announced its end. Only when that announcement came could she believe that the end had come.”31 Speaking from an outsider’s perspective, this narrator’s comment brings together the

31 Ibid., 111.
key notions demonstrated above: romance and diaspora. In the novel, Xiaohan waits just like the protagonists of *Waiting for Godot*, while realizing what she is waiting for will probably never come. She is tangled with longing and belonging while suffering from the pain of waiting. Choosing to come to a new land and running away from one lover and then from another places Xiaohan in a loop of continuous desperate waiting, a loop that is self-created.

Rather than just a physical movement, diaspora as examined in this novel is an emotional and existential state, or rather a survival tactic for Shi Yu, one that allows her to cope with her insecurities in her relationships. Her professional ability enables her to leave China for the United States to escape from an uncertain relationship and look for new opportunities. She chooses a mindset typical of diaspora; by running away from insecurity, she attempts to regain control in her relationships.

2. From Homesickness to Lovesickness

In “Nostalgia and Its Discontents,” Boym writes that “The imperative of a contemporary nostalgic” is “to be homesick and to be sick of being at home—occasionally at the same time.” This statement aptly describes the lovesickness and homesickness in Xiaohan’s life. Xiaohan cannot overcome her homesickness in a foreign land. Distance from Dr. Gao does not give her emotional relief, and her loneliness is intensified by her foreign experience: “America, particularly New York, is still peoples’ country and city, they are distant, not home, and not as close as hometown. Coming far away from a foreign land, what pains us is homesickness and

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loneliness. Homesickness comes anytime and loneliness always follows.” Not being able to get rid of her desolation, Xiaohan imagines asking fellow students who study abroad for sympathy: “friends who are away from home, on the other shore of the ocean, besides loneliness, what else do you have?” Chinatown and the hospital there somehow give her a sense of belonging: “Beauties from the East and Chinese characters give one a sense of home, as if you were not far away from home, or even if one is physically away, one’s heart is still with home.”

Xiaohan is desperate for love, hoping love will fill her emptiness and loneliness in a foreign land: “No matter what a painful past and tough present Xiaohan has, after all she needs love and care, she needs to feel the meaningfulness of life.” She puts on a tough appearance in order to protect herself from being hurt, yet undoubtedly she craves attention, love and care as much as before. She can’t be in her physical homeland, but being in relationships in a foreign land might give her a sense of home, she believes. In the new land, she is “cast away” from the surrounding cultural environment and becomes isolated: Nothing makes sense, and nothing is relevant to her. Under this circumstance, what constitutes reality for her are the physical and psychological needs of sex and love. These become the point at which she reconnects with the outside world and transforms an alien place into a possible new home while her old home has been lost, and becoming the proof that she is still alive and her existence is still meaningful.

Perhaps, in the new land, Xiaohan is desperate for love and attention. Once a female patient who breaks up with her lover and attempts to commit suicide, desperately says, “Please,

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34 Ibid., 95.
35 Ibid., 96.
36 Ibid., 182.
somebody, love me, love me, because it’s too hard to love myself.” The patient’s pain and loneliness touch Xiaohan, making her feel “beaten by this unveiled, direct shout.” The patient’s hopelessness reminds Xiaohan of the uncertainty of her future and the patient’s desperation echoes Xiaohan’s own desperation for love. The more desperate she is for new hope and love in the United States, the more disappointed and upset she becomes like this girl. Hearing the patient’s cry, Xiaohan is reminded of Russian painter Fyodor Vasilyev’s 1872 painting “Wet Meadow.” She imagines “the grass floating under the surface of the lake coming closer and closer.” The narrator then goes on to explain Xiaohan’s loneliness with the painting: “Weak sunlight cast onto the open grassland with great difficulty… there stands an old tree across the grassland, with its branches pointing at the sky, as if crying, ‘who is to love me?’” Xiaohan goes on to think, “in most people’s eyes this patient would be seen as someone who overreacts, misbehaves, and is defective.” Xiaohan’s empathy is so strong that she can’t help lamenting the indifference of society.

Xiaohan’s longing for her homeland while she is in the United States echoes her longing for love in the story, particularly her longing for Dr. Gao. In this way, lovesickness and homesickness are paralleled in the novel. Psychologists have pointed out the commonalities between these two feelings: “(1) strong affective reactions arise when the individual is separated from the place or person; (2) the home or person is not replaceable or exchangeable; and (3) the cognitive and somatic sensations show remarkable similarity: obsessive thoughts, rumination,

37 Ibid., 128.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid., 129.
40 Ibid.
idealization, stomach troubles, lack of appetite, and sleeplessness.”

To Boym, “Nostalgia can be a poetic creation, an individual mechanism of survival.” Xiaohan’s diasporic journey is her survival tactic to gain control in her relationship with Dr. Gao in China. What stands at the core of Xiaohan’s diasporic experience is the lost emotional home—her relationship with Gao. The book’s narrative alternates between Xiaohan’s past and present, with one chapter on her present life in the United States followed by a chapter that focuses on her past in China. In this structural way, Xiaohan’s romance with Dr. Gao in the past, and her memories of him in the present, are put side by side in the novel.

It is not Xiaohan’s experience abroad that constitutes her experience as diaspora, but her past and present of her experience, a mapping across time and space, a “double exposure” in Boym’s term, “of home and abroad, of past and present, of dream and everyday life.” Her emotional attachment to and vivid memories of Dr. Gao are also present in her experience in the States. While in the United States, Xiaohan constantly thinks about Dr. Gao: “Gao Fanwei, this name that sounds familiar but strange, a shadow that is both distanced and close, comes up in Xiaohan’s heart all the time. How is he doing now? Suddenly, an irresistible reverie arises; Xiaohan wants to cry.” Xiaohan’s emotions are mixed with yearning and loss, desire and fear. Her nostalgia for Gao, in Boym’s words, is a “romance with (her) own fantasy.”

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43 Ibid., 7.
44 Ibid., 114.
Xiaohan overly relies on Gao from the moment she falls in love with him. Once when going out with colleagues, she bravely jumps into the cold river but, suddenly trapped in it, “her heart is tangled with the fear of death and the desire to live.” On the verge of giving up, she is saved by Gao, who later becomes her lover. His talent as a surgeon attracts Xiaohan: what “constantly appears in her mind is a pair of man’s hands, a pair of slim, flexible hands of a surgeon, like watching a movie, one scene after another.” The fact that Xiaohan is charmed by beautiful, slim and long fingers demonstrates that what attracts Xiaohan is not Gao’s appearance, but his expertise and capability, his calmness and efficiency in dealing with emergencies. Gao’s ability to save her and patients gives Xiaohan a sense of security; however, Gao’s privileged background and his previous marriage make her insecure. Her sense of belonging is then compromised by her own insecurity and vulnerability. When Dr. Gao’s ex-wife comes back to him after her husband dies, Xiaohan feels unsettled and dissatisfied. A strong contrast appears on a single page in the book: at one moment, Xiaohan feels happy imagining herself in a wedding gown, holding Gao’s arm; at the next, she is miserable, feeling anxious and upset, holding two unused tickets to a show she can’t bring herself to attend with him, all because of her growing fear of his relationship with his previous family.

Unhappy with this situation, Xiaohan leaves China for the United States, hoping to regain independence and control in her life and relationship, “uprooting herself and going to a foreign land solitarily.” Here Xiaohan chooses diaspora, or rather, self-exile, as a way of escaping from her disappointing love experience. Gao does not abandon her; yet the disrupted sense of

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46 Ibid., 87.
47 Ibid., 17.
48 Ibid., 161.
belonging and love pushes her to abandon her love for him, as she feels vulnerable in the relationship. Running away to another country grants her a chance to retain Gao’s longing and desire for her.

As Marianne David and Javier Muñoz-Basols point out in *Defining and Re-Defining Diaspora*, “Etched in memory and idealized by nostalgia, the vanished home associated with the angst of exclusion, loss, abandonment would become a driving force, a relentless desire to recover one’s emotional center against the unbearable pressure of an alien reality. Hence the self-conscious drama of diasporic identity: of the homeless self in search of both a home and a land, a home-land.”\(^49\) Like the diasporic experience David and Muñoz-Basols describe, she clings to Gao’s memory as a defense against the “pressure of an alien reality” in New York. Interestingly she is also forcing this abandonment—partially to force a restoration of balance in her relationship with Gao. When Gao’s sister later sees Xiaohan in New York, she asks, “So, you want my brother to miss you forever?”\(^50\) She hopes, by walking away, to prove that the dependence is mutual, to prove that he needs her as much as she needs him. In fact, Gao looks for her after she leaves. Just as Boym says, “nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship.”\(^51\) Xiaohan’s way of retaining their love is to transform the present into the past, to give up the potential future to that nostalgic past. Their separation then becomes a driving force for Xiaohan to look for her emotional center in her foreign experience. Yet, what essentially constitutes her diasporic identity is the escape and distance she creates herself. Therefore the


\(^{50}\) Shi Yu, *Niuyue Qingren*, 187.

self-conscious drama of diasporic identity of the homeless self in search of both a home and a land is Xiaohan’s self-creation, a fiction she has written for herself.

Allowing herself to become a diaspora provides Xiaohan leeway to escape from her situation with Gao, yet the power of gaining control of her own fate is undermined by loneliness and sadness in a new land. In other words, Xiaohan’s parting from Gao gives her physical but not emotional escape. In the United State, she not only constantly thinks of him, but also at times regrets her own withdrawal: “why would I leave so unsympathetically and emotionally,” she asks herself. In this way, Xiaohan still holds on to the slight fantasy of a life with Dr. Gao. Xiaohan leaves and gives up that future with him, but she constantly imagines what her life would have been if she hadn’t left. In order to restore her independence in relationships and gain control of her life, she runs away from Gao, but as a consequence she creates a longing that sustains and justifies her love for him. She thus finds herself fantasizing about a lost home—one that never quite existed—and a possibility that she herself destroyed.

Further, her nostalgia for Dr. Gao is not only presented in her relentless memories but also in her current relationship with Shi Jie, another doctor who resembles Dr. Gao. A brief description of Shi Jie emphasizes his alertness: “his eyes are sharper than his mouth, as if nothing in the world could escape from him; it seems he could easily read people.”52 Shi Jie’s capable hands attract her and remind her of Dr. Gao, as the end of first chapter suggests: “Shi Jie’s pair of hands, leads Xiaohan’s imagination of similarly slim and flexible hands of another surgeon.”53 In addition to being a surgeon as talented as Gao, Shi Jie is in a similar marital situation. When Shi Jie finally enters into a relationship with Xiaohan, he tells her that he has

52 Shi Yu, Niyue Qingren, 11.
53 Ibid., 16.
been interested in her from the beginning but could not act on his desire because he is married. In a similar way, Dr. Gao is attracted to Xiaohan in the beginning but he hesitates to approach her, worrying his divorce would affect her. In order to protect her, he suppresses his own passion and desire. Moreover, both Dr. Shi and Dr. Gao share a serious face and a gentle heart. As an experienced doctor, Shi Jie seems to inhabit a role: serious, strict, unapproachable. Yet underneath he is very passionate, which can be seen in his relationship with his mistress Linda and with Xiaohan. The two men are so alike that Xiaohan, perhaps, does not love Shi Jie but rather loves Dr. Gao through him. To become involved with Dr. Shi is a way of continuing her story with Dr. Gao; a way to redeem her lost chance of being with Dr. Gao.

On Xiaohan and Shi Jie’s romantic night as lovers, Shi Jie holds her from behind, passionately and intimately as Dr. Gao did. After their conversation there is a brief, indirect but intense sexual description: “Shi Jie springs into life, and makes all his effort, as if chasing after a beloved shadow, full of passion, fighting until he is out of breath…she lies nude in front of Shi Jie in a comfortable and obedient manner.” This moment of passion directly contrasts with the desperate moment of her disappearance. The sweet moment of their relationship, as it becomes sexual—soon turns to be a vain hope and a desperate waiting.

Shi Jie and Xiaohan’s romantic moment promises a future but the future is immediately denied. After she disappears, Xiaohan becomes a victim of tragedy, and the object of her colleagues’ sympathy. Dr. Shi Jie’s desperate search for her sustains his longing for Xiaohan and their unfulfilled romance. Upset by Xiaohan’s disappearance and unable to see her corpse, Shi Jie refuses to accept that she is dead. Indeed the author leaves her disappearance a mystery:

54 Ibid., 253.
55 Ibid., 255–6.
Xiaohan could possibly be alive since her body is never found. Running away in the chaotic disaster of 9/11 would fit the pattern of her previous escape. Even Shi Jie’s desperate searching echoes Gao’s search for her after she leaves China secretly. In fact throughout the whole novel she establishes a pattern of running away from her relationships. For instance, in the beginning of the novel a brief romantic story between Xiaohan and an American classmate Jack takes place in Washington Square. Xiaohan is immediately attracted to Jack and follows him home. She leaves before Jack makes a move on her. By leaving her lovers, Xiaohan turns herself from someone waiting and searching for love into someone being looked for.

The end of the story brings Xiaohan’s personal dissatisfaction with love to a higher, more universal level—a disaster that brings an end to thousands of people’s lives, possibly including Xiaohan’s. The last chapter and a half of the novel are a detailed description of the tragic scene of 9/11: “The air is filled with confusion and fear”56 and “Sept. 11, 2001 is a day that makes more than two thousand families shatter, a darkest day in New York history, and the most tragic day in U.S. history.”57 The novel turns at this point as people look for Xiaohan instead of her looking for people and love. The whole novel focuses on describing the emotional vulnerabilities and sensitivities of Xiaohan, but in the end the novel turns to show the general vulnerability and fragility of human lives. Xiaohan’s disappearance in 9/11 at the end of the story on the one hand extends her story to the larger world; on the other hand, the sad ending implies that the great disaster like 9/11 is the only way of pulling human beings of all ethnicities together. Taking it further, we can see that disappearance is also the only way for Xiaohan to become immersed into

56 Ibid., 260.
57 Ibid., 261.
American society. Yet the tragedy directs a sharp turn from the progression of the story, since it happens immediately after Xiaohan has a passionate and romantic night with Shi Jie.

The novel leaves Xiaohan’s life and death in ambiguity. She is perhaps running away again just as she ran away from Dr. Gao in China. By running away, she constantly keeps a distance from her lovers and sustains their longing for her. While being away from Gao, her nostalgia and lovesickness lead her to reconstruct his image in her mind, which represents homeland to her. Yet at the same time she constantly runs away because of her fear of love and the loss of control of her life. Xiaohan stands at the grey area of both restorative and reflective nostalgia that Boym defines. Restorative nostalgia drives her to reconstruct the image of home, in this case, her lover in China, Dr. Gao. The “reflective nostalgia” stays in Xiaohan’s longings and belongings and delays her homecoming. Kevin playing the song “Returning Home” at the end of the story seems to wish her to return home after her disappearance, hoping she would find a sense of belonging despite her isolation from the society. Yet coming with the end of her diasporic journey is the impossibility of a homecoming. While replacing one diasporic journey with another, Xiaohan is further and further away from her homeland.

Xiaohan’s story exemplifies Boym’s ideas about nostalgia, seeing it as “a strategy for survival, a way of making sense of the impossibility of homecoming.”58 Xiaohan’s self-invented distance from her lovers and homeland creates a nostalgic love based on both memories of the past and fantasies for the future. The backward-looking and forward-looking aspect of nostalgic love plays an essential role in diasporic identities. The contradiction of the restorative and reflective nostalgias constitutes a lack in herself, which causes an existential angst. Diaspora, as

well as nostalgia, becomes to Xiaohan a survival tactic to help her deal with that angst. Boym’s framing, “the imperative of a contemporary nostalgic: to be homesick and to be sick of being at home—occasionally at the same time,” in this novel translates into “to be lovesick and to be sick of being in love.”

3. Security—Adventure vs. Home—Diaspora

In Shi Yu’s novel discussed above, we can see that elements of love and human needs, as psychotherapist Esther Perel states, are the secret to sustaining desire: “on the one hand our needs for security, for predictability, for safety, for dependability, for reliability, for permanence, all these anchoring, grounding experiences of our lives that we called ‘home’; but we also have an equally strong need, men and women, for adventure, for novelty, for mystery, for risk, for danger, for the unknown, for the unexpected, surprised, you get the gist, for journey, for travel.” New York Lover shows that Xiaohan has a paradoxical desire for security/home and adventure/journey with the two elements constructing a symbiosis. It is the reconciliation of the security/home and adventure/diaspora that sustains the desire to be always in love. In this section I will elaborate on this dialectic between security and adventure through another Chinese immigrant novel, Chen Qian’s Listen to the Caged Bird Sing (Wangduan nanfei yan 望斷南飛雁, 2010).

59 Ibid., 18.
Chen Qian lives in the California Bay Area and has worked in the Silicon Valley chip design industry. She grew up in Nanning, China and came to the United States in 1989 to study electrical engineering. She is one of the pioneers of Chinese network writers. She became popular on a well-known North American cultural site called “Guofeng” with her “mood of the sea” column. Her novels include *Love in Loveless Silicon Valley* (Ai zai wu’ai de guigu 愛在無愛的硅谷, 2002), *Gone as Falling Water* (Fushui 覆水, 2004), *Listen to the Caged Bird Sing* (Wangduan nanfèi yan 望斷南飛雁, 2010), *Infinity Mirror* (Wuqiong jìng 無窮鏡, 2016), etc. In addition, her works have won many awards.

Published in 2010, Chen Qian’s *Listen to the Caged Bird Sing*, narrates a story of a couple’s diasporic experience in the United States. The novel starts with Peining’s flashback when he spends a winter night by himself thinking of his wife who has left. Peining is a biologist who has always wanted to be an academic. In the winter when he receives an admission letter from Columbia University, he meets Nanyan who immediately fills the emptiness that his previous girlfriend Lei Wang left him with. Lei Wang is an ambitious scientist who is driven to achieve great success in her career. She breaks up with Peining when he refuses to follow her to a prestigious science university. Nanyan gladly agrees to go to the United States with Peining.

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61 For her biographical information see her invited speech at Emory University: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0-quDkUQdmY.

62 Online writers have become a popular phenomenon in China in the twenty-first century. And the “Chinese online writer rich list” released in 2012 keeps track of changes in the wealth of Chinese writers and the trend of Chinese people’s reading. This shows that the contemporary Chinese writings have been popularized.

However, years of being a housewife life dissatisfy her and push her to leave home. Finally she decides to venture into her own dream in San Francisco—to go to Art school.

In this novella, we see the co-existence of security and adventure, home and diaspora in both Peining’s and Nanyan’s psyche. Peining feels content with his family life and works hard to take care of his family financially, then he comes to the States for a better education and works hard to earn a tenured professorship. While he is assured that his professional work will guarantee the security of his family, he ignores the frustration of his wife and finally his family breaks apart. Similarly, Nanyan struggles between traditional family ideals that define a good wife and her own dream of pursuing the life that she wants to live in the United States. Finally she breaks through the traditional boundaries and embarks on her own journey in pursuit of her dream. Although both the husband and wife get a certain degree of security and a sense of home in their diasporic journey, the story calls into doubt whether home as family necessarily generates a sense of home that offers security and comfort. Through portraying the tension between security and adventure within the household, the story challenges the idealistic sense of home that can be constantly in the making on a diasporic route.

Instead of a realistic portrayal of Nanyan’s life, what readers know about Nanyan’s current life from the novel is told by her good friend Yalan, that “she becomes an entirely new person, ” that she favors purple but she seldom wears it, that “she wears pony tails that do not seem appropriate for a mother of two kids.” It is evident that Nanyan desires to become a new person and start a new journey. Having left her family behind, Nanyan lives in San Francisco,

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64 Chen Qian, Wangduan nanfei yan 望斷南飛雁 [Listen to the Caged Bird Sing] (Beijing: Xinxing Chubanshe, 2010), 11.
65 Ibid., 9.
66 Ibid., 11.
where she can see the Pacific Ocean. Nanyan describes that sea as “where you can see Beihai’s Silver Beach under the shiny stars over the South China Sea.”\textsuperscript{67} In San Francisco the large Cantonese community and the closeness to Pacific resonate with her hometown in China.

Just like Peining who comes to the United States to pursue a degree and establish a career, Nanyan is as eager to pursue her own dream. However, her upbringing does not give her the freedom to do what she likes: she can not find a good painting teacher although she has talent; she is forced to study the major her parents choose for her. For her, America and Peining embody a promise for her potential future. She reveals to Peining many years after their marriage that, “the most important reason she married him is that Peining represents a very attractive possibility in her future—America.”\textsuperscript{68} From early on Nanyan prepares herself to live in the States. She works hard to improve her English and takes the initiative to correspond with Peining in English. In Guangzhou, she tells Peining, “I really envy those girls who pursue studies in the United States!”\textsuperscript{69} She wishes she might be one of those who are able to achieve their dreams in a foreign land: “Hidden in Nanyan’s heart there is a seed, which would crazily grow once it encounters suitable soil.”\textsuperscript{70} Even before she goes to America she imagines America to be that fertile soil. A good friend of Nanyan, Zhang Ni, used to tell her that “in America, you can get whatever you want.”\textsuperscript{71} Apparently Nanyan excitedly goes to the States with Peining not to be a housewife or a companion, but to explore her potential future in a new land.

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 8.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 40.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 46.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 40.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 61.
Yet Nanyan’s life in the United States does not turn out as she wishes. Instead of pursuing her own dream, she becomes merely a supporter and facilitator for Peining to achieve his American dream. Peining gradually builds up his career and fame in his field—spending five years on his PhD in Columbia, then working as a Post-doc at Cornell for another three years, before taking a temporary teaching position in Virginia and finally beginning a tenure track position at the University of Oregon. At home he feels warm and comfortable in a simple house with Nanyan. And she is dedicated to being a good wife: she keeps everything at home tidy and clean, goes to cooking classes and prepares various meals, tirelessly raising two kids and taking care of her husband. Nanyan becomes a very talented housewife. When Peining’s advisor and his wife come to their house for a party, Nanyan cooks both delicious Chinese and Western cuisines. However, “she is absent from the laughter in the house.” The tedious everyday life of the housewife disappoints her. Peining sees the sadness in Nanyan’s eyes when his advisor says her American dream has been achieved. Nanyan tells Peining that his advisor is not right: “That’s my American dream in the mind of you all,” she says. She claims that others force on her the life she lives. There seem to be dreams hidden in her that no one knows about. She slowly isolates herself and speaks less. She sadly cries, saying “What kind of life do we have?” Peining answers the question in his heart, “That is my life.” For him, making significant contributions in his field, becoming a tenured professor, is his dream and his life. While supporting his dream Nanyan has neglected her own; what she has been doing is merely to help her husband to achieve

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72 Ibid., 78.
73 Ibid., 79.
74 Ibid., 82.
75 Ibid., 83.
76 Ibid., 84.
his dream and build his family. She speaks in English, “Too bad, that is not my American
dream,” emphasizing “American dream.” The American dream is what she hopes for when she
marries Peining and comes to the United States, but it is taken away by her chores as a
housewife.

Disappointed, Nanyan questions the meaning of her life. She even asks what her children
mean to her and Peining states that children are the continuation of her life. Disagreeing with
Peining’s biological view that one has children to pass genes onto the next generations, a process
essential to human beings, Nanyan finds raising children to be nothing but repetitive
commitments and meaningless activity, from her mother to her, then to her children.\(^\text{78}\) As her
frustration grows, she becomes annoyed with any dirt at home and often argues with her
husband. She feels she has been treated unfairly because she undertakes most household chores
while he pursues his own dream. The tension between husband and wife follows the tension
between the traditional roles expected of a wife and her own dream. Traditional Confucianism
defines good women as those who obey their husband and take good care of the children.
Western ideology, however, encourages women to have their own identity. Luce Irigaray, in her
1992 \textit{Elemental Passions}, proposes new models of sexual identity to upset the balance of
relationship between men and women: “she should not be subordinated first to her father, her
uncle or her brother, then to her husband’s line, nor to the values of a masculine identity, whether
these be social, economic or cultural. She therefore needs her own linguistic, religious and
political values. She needs to be situated and valued, to be \textit{she} in relation to her self.”\(^\text{79}\) Irigaray’s

\(^{77}\) Ibid., 61.
\(^{78}\) Ibid., 84.
The proposal is clearly opposite to the Confucian view of “the three obediences and the four virtues.”\textsuperscript{80} With a traditional Chinese upbringing and an ambitious American dream, Nanyan constantly adjusts the two sides in her mind: Eastern and Western, traditional and modern.

Nanyan’s psychological struggle casts light on the immigrant experience. Immigrants’ journey is not easy; as Nanyan describes: it is like walking on a wire above a cliff. With a strong hope of success, Peining says he is walking on that wire every day.\textsuperscript{81} Nanyan, however, sees the skeletons below the wire on the cliff. She is scared of becoming one of those skeletons like her friend Zhang Ni, who becomes depressed after giving birth. Instead of becoming part of the skeletons she imagines seeing below the cliff, she hopes to walk the wire to reach her own treasure. Although drained by household chores, Nanyan does not give up her dream. She had grown up at the end of the Cultural Revolution and did not have a chance to cultivate her interests and receive a good education in China, but she always wanted to learn art and design. Their new neighbor, a Vietnamese girl called A Jiao, evokes Nanyan’s long-buried dream. As a Vietnamese refugee, A Jiao is relocated to Montreal. She studies hard to earn her degree, and then opens her own business. She says: “In the United States, if you work hard, you can get whatever you want.”\textsuperscript{82} Unlike her friend Zhang Ni, who succumbed to depression, Nanyan can choose to live like this Vietnamese girl A Jiao. She decides to find her own value not in the family and traditional ideals, but in her own dream.

\textsuperscript{80} The “Three Obediences and Four Virtues (三從四德)” refer to a set of moral principles especially for women in Confucianism. The three obediences include to her father as a daughter (未嫁従父), her husband as a wife (既嫁従夫), and her sons in widowhood (夫死従子). The four female virtues, which was discussed in Ban Zhao’s \textit{Admonitions for Women (Nüjie 女誡)}, include: morality (従德), proper speech (従言), modest manner and diligent work (従功). For some details please see WM T. De Bary and Irene Bloom eds., \textit{Sources of Chinese Tradition} vol.1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 821-4.

\textsuperscript{81} Chen Qian, \textit{Wangduan nanfei yan}, 62.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 94.
With departure in mind, Nanyan prepares her children for her departure. She applies for Art School and only tells her husband when she is accepted. When Peining is worried about the children being left alone, she confidently says, “Every day I watch my child running to me, I don’t need you to tell me how to be a mother. A good mother should help children to get ready to leave her… I want to let them understand: human beings are not just randomly hooked to the chain of genes, to live is not just to pass on genes! But one has to listen to one’s heart…” What surprises Peining is that their daughter can cook and take care of her younger brother after Nanyan leaves. Nanyan teaches her children, by her own example that physical closeness does not necessarily bring one a sense of home, and life is for pursuing their individual dreams. Just as the title of the story “Listen to the Caged Bird Sing” suggests, Nanyan chooses to step out of the social restrictive boundaries and listen to her own heart. Her value can only be realized and her freedom can only be achieved the moment she gets out of the cage.

At the same time, her physical departure from her family does not cut her ties with them. When she leaves she takes a family picture with her, which shows her and her two children on the beach, taken by her husband at a happy moment. On Christmas Eve Nanyan delivers presents to her children. But it is a mystery whether she delivers them herself or not. Nanyan’s departure, which Peining refuses to call “abandonment,” brings back memories of her to Peining. Not

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83 Ibid., 104.
84 Ibid., 12.
85 I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is a 1969 autobiography about the early years of African-American writer and poet Maya Angelou. The first in a seven-volume series, it is a coming-of-age story that illustrates how strength of character and a love of literature can help overcome racism and trauma (from https://english.colostate.edu/news/black-history-month-nonfiction-reading-list/). The title of Chen Qian’s novel could be a reference to that poem.
86 Chen Qian, Wangduan nanfei yan, 4.
until she is gone does he cherish what makes him feel comfortable at home: “the open pencil box, cards, books, Barbie dolls.” Nanyan finds ways to connect herself to her family.

Nanyan’s sense of home is therefore generated by physical separation and emotional attachment at the same time. Interestingly, this is also what defines diaspora; the physical distance and emotional connection are key elements of Safran’s original definition. In this story, drawn by the tension between security and adventure, traditional ideals and American dreams, home and diaspora become part and parcel of each other: diaspora becomes a prerequisite for the establishment of “home,” i.e., a sense of belonging.


In *Listen to the Caged Bird Sing*, love becomes a channel through which diasporic subjects negotiate personal desires and cultural expectations, social constraints in Chinese tradition and cultural exposure to the West. The conflict between personal desires and social constraints is not rare; what is unique in the stories discussed in this chapter is that the diasporic identities constitute and are constituted by these conflicts. In *the Caged Bird*, for example, Nanyan’s diasporic journey makes her American dream possible; at the same time it challenges the social role and traditional expectations of a wife. Near the end of the novel, Peining is told that Nanyan is going to Art Center College of Design, one of the best design schools in the United States. When Nanyan is closer and closer to her dream, she is further and further away

Ibid., 16.

In Safran’s definition of diaspora, he includes, “they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original “center” to two or more “peripheral,” or foreign, regions… they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another.” See William Safran, “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return,” *Diaspora* 1.1 (1991): 83–99.
from her family. Between the secure, realistic home and idealized, adventurous journey, Nanyan chooses the latter. The former does not register a sense of home to her in America, whereas the latter fulfills her. Rong Rong’s *Notes of a Couple* (*Fuqi biji*, 夫妻筆記, 2005) reiterates these conflicts, and more explicitly in love and sex.

Rong Rong graduated with a major in journalism and worked as a reporter and editor in Shanghai. She went to the United States in 1987 and currently is the editor-in-chief of Light Boat Publisher （Qingzhou chubanshe 輕舟出版社）in the United States. Her first work *Morning, Mr. Wild Bear* (*Zaoan, yexiong xianshen* 早安，野熊先生, 1997), is collected in the *Chinese Overseas Students Series*. It describes a biracial newlyweds’ romantic story when they camp in a deep valley. After this tale, Rong Rong spent almost two years on a novella called *Journey* (*Yuanxing 遠行*) centering on a couple who experience the Cultural Revolution but still love each other even though separated by ocean. Yet tragedy overtakes them when they are about to start a new life. In 2002 Rong Rong published *Susu’s American Romance* (*Susu de Meiguo lianqing 素素的美國戀情*). Many of her works focus on “emotion” or “sentimentality” 89 and the novel *Notes of a Couple* is an example of this.

*Notes of a Couple* describes a Chinese couple’s struggles and conflicts before they apply for green cards in the United States. The husband Renping comes to the United States to study and his wife works to support the family. The Chinese couple’s American life is at first disappointing: draining, boring, expensive, with no chance to get a green card, expensive and

89 For a list of her works, see Rong Rong’s personal website on *Haiwai wenxuan*.
stressful student life. One day, however, the wife gets an opportunity—being a nanny that would permit her to apply for green card. The wife takes the job and moves into the American household. This opens up a new world to the Chinese couple and changes their lives. The Chinese wife is introduced to modeling, which pushes her to realize and pursue her own desires. The couple’s encounter with Americans also unleashes their sexual desires and finally leads to their separation.

Although the Chinese couple’s American experience showcases the distinction between Eastern and Western views, the novel is more focused on the conflicts between personal desires and social constraints on a larger scale. In this novel, the conflicts between personal desires and social constraints become irreconcilable once the Chinese couple moves to live with the American family. The American residence becomes the main arena for the conflicts between personal desires and traditional ideals. In the American household, Peifen develops strong sexual desire for Gracia’s ex-husband Bailey; at the same time Renping cannot resist his beautiful American colleague Nicole. Love and sex become where the Chinese couple negotiates between personal desires and social responsibilities. Renping is torn by the tension between the two and is constantly pulled back by social responsibilities; while Peifen actively pursues her own desires which have been stifled in her married life. In the end Peifen abandons a view of what a traditional Chinese wife should be, and her husband Renping abandons his dream of building a home and protecting his family in the United States. Their marital relationship is destroyed when they come to realize their personal desires on their diasporic journey.

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90 Rong Rong, Fuqi biji 夫妻筆記 [Notes of a Couple] (Beijing: Shijie zhishi Chubanshe, 2005), 2.
Similar to Nanyan in the *Caged Bird*, Peifen’s experience in the American family enables her to release her personal feelings and desires from the social constraints of being a traditional Chinese wife. The changes taking place in Peifen are a process of her self-discovery and a realization of her self-worth. In the beginning, she does not think highly of herself, and thinks that “in (her husband’s) mind, I am the rubbish he picked up.” In order to support her husband’s tuition, she works hard like a rural woman without any complaint. The host of the family that Peifen works for, Gracia, and her ex-husband, Bailey, introduce her to the clothing and modeling industry. Peifen’s modeling career inspires her to appreciate her own value. With their help she grows into a different person, someone who feels “I can do whatever others can.” Not until she hears compliments about her looks and starts being a model does she realize her own value.

Peifen’s encounter with Gracia and Bailey enables her to transform herself, and pushes her to realize and pursue her own personal desires. As Peifen builds up her individual subjectivity, Peifen’s mind is dominated by getting her career settled and getting a green card, and she unconsciously ignores her husband. Once when her husband climbs onto her and tries to have sex with her, she wants to yell at him, and asks him to “get out” but she can not, since she believes that being a wife makes her a legal sexual object. This perception of herself as a marital object reflects her low self-esteem at the time. Although she has lost interest in sexual activity with her husband, Peifen still submits herself to him as a wife, while secretly hoping for a new future. “As soon as we get our green card we will break up,” she thinks. Her husband

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91 Rong Rong, *Fuqi biji*, 55.
92 Ibid., 4.
93 Ibid., 64.
94 Ibid., 67.
represents a restrictive sphere where her personal desires have been suppressed. Fearing his rejection and intolerance, she hides both her modeling and her affair with Bailey.

The husband also mirrors the part of her thinking that complies with traditional ideology. The fear of telling her husband that she models reflects her fear of confronting her old self: “Did I forget who I am? Why did I come to model for an advertising company,” she asks herself. But her new self grows stronger and stronger until it can prevail over the old self. By the end of the novel when she goes to a dance party with her husband, he finds her to be like an evil spirit that is filled with desire and passion. The “devil” that Renping names represents the personal desires inside Peifen. For Renping, Peifen’s modeling is like a devil escaping from a bottle; a devil that once come out can never be put back. Her confident, courageous and eager self takes over in the end.

Peifen’s development of her new self closely correlates with her relationship with Bailey, her photographer and Gracia’s ex-husband. He is her incentive to pursue her own desires. Ironically, there is barely any description of Bailey’s appearance and character in the novel. It seems that Peifen is less attracted to him as a person and more to his sexual prowess. Gracia and Bailey’s open sexual intercourse stimulates her: “a naked couple…sitting on the floor against the couch, with face pointing to the sky, eyes closed, mouths open.” This openly sexual scene exposes Peifen to a new way of love—passionate and revealing, different from the conservative, traditional love she is used to having with her husband. There is no disguising of their private lives and desires. Listening to the sounds of their love-making, Peifen suddenly feels herself to

\[95\] Ibid., 156.
\[96\] Ibid., 200.
be a grownup. Her voyeurism excites her instantly, and gradually makes her part of the activity. However, different parts of her react differently to her imagination: it is “provocation but seduction; stimulus but hindrance; excitement but pain.” Part of her wants to get away from these thoughts yet her internal desires overwhelm her. She yields to her internal desire and lets it grow in her imagination.

After Peifen sees the open sexual intercourse between Gracia and Bailey, she is stimulated and at times imagines herself as part of the scene. When Bailey later photographs Peifen, she feels stimulated by his smell. Even though she knows that Bailey does not love her, she boldly asks to have sex with him: “Bailey, I want an experience that breaks through my bottom line, like Gracia, making love with a real man, for a long, long time.” His agreement puts her in tears, because it is the first time she actively pursues what she wants with courage and passion. To express her own desire is her first time transgressing boundaries. She then becomes addicted to the physical and sexual experience she has with him. She feels that “his body is like (her) vast sea, where I am an airship crossing through.” This image indicates that Bailey provides a site where Peifen can freely explore her own desires.

Peifen’s affection towards Bailey also comes from his affirmation of her value by telling and showing her that she is beautiful with his words and photography. Desiring Bailey is at the same time proving herself desirable. Her love for him is narcissistic: through him she finds her own beauty and value. Her modeling job and her affair with Bailey fill her with confidence, and

97 Ibid., 78.
98 Ibid., 80.
99 Ibid., 128.
100 Ibid., 130.
101 Ibid., 139.
give her a self-assurance that she has never gained from her married life. Bailey generates a force within her to grow into a confident woman in a new world. Once a stranger approaches her when she shops, and asks her out for a date. He is gay but he feels that he is not himself after seeing her. She pulls herself close to him, helping him to test his sexual orientation; but more so, she tests her own attraction. Bailey transforms her from the embodiment of self-pity to someone with great self-love.

Bailey creates in Peifen a sense of home in a foreign land; this home, however, is imagined rather than realistic. Bailey can never be fully available to Peifen. For Bailey, making love is nothing but an art. Although he has passionate sex with Peifen, he never sees her as more than his model. With the coexistence of closeness and distance, Bailey rouses in her a wild sort of yearning and a passionate physical desire. Bailey fills her mind with desire and passion. Once when she models for a bra advertisement with another photographer, Mark, she imagines Bailey in her changing room. “Bailey, Bailey, is this your hand?” she asks, “the space behind (her) back is filled with Bailey’s body, his hands touch (her) skin, holding (her) breasts.” With this imagination of him, Peifen becomes extremely confident and sexy. Regardless of who the photographer is, she seems to hear many compliments like “you are the prettiest girl in the world! You are an angel! You are a princess!” No matter who is shooting her pictures, she only has Bailey in her mind. To her, Bailey is the comfort zone she imagines for herself, from whom she can gain confidence and security.

In her relationship with Bailey, Peifen constantly re-invents herself and gradually realizes her own value. In his discussion of qing 情(emotion) in Tang Xianzu’s Peony Pavilion (Mudan

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102 Ibid., 148–9.
103 Ibid., 155.
Ting 牡丹亭), Martin W. Huang claims that the desire of Du Liniang, female protagonist who is confined by her father in her boudoir, comes from her reading and dreaming, followed by an invention of an object to sustain that desire.104 Peifen and Bailey’s case here is similar: Peifen is stimulated by seeing his sexual play with Gracia, then imagines herself a part of it. She then constantly fantasizes about Bailey to sustain her desire. Huang goes on to argue that Du Liniang’s desire is sustained “by constantly inventing and reinventing both the object and the subject.”105 This self-generating process also takes place in Peifen. The fantasized Bailey later becomes her sexual partner in reality, and the fantasizing Peifen is reinvented into someone who is bold, confident, and openly expresses her desire. Peifen’s love is less a sincere love for Bailey than the recognition of her self-worth and the cultivation of her self-love.

Just as Bailey to Peifen, Renping’s American colleague Nicole serves as a home to Renping where he finds a sense of security and comfort. The satisfaction he gains from their intimacy makes him feel as if he is “returning to his mother, with all the worries and fears removed.” In the midst of a stressful and worrisome life in the United States, Nicole serves as Renping’s shelter, where he finds security and comfort. “I finally found my home, my graveyard.”106 In a Chinese context, a graveyard, where one is buried, often suggests a homeland where one returns to (luoye guigen). It seems his meaningless draining life style in the States suddenly finds its meaning from her body, which feels like his home, harbor and heaven.107 Nicole gives him a sense of solace in a foreign land, a home away from his homeland.

104 See Martin W. Huang, Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China (Boston: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), 78.
105 Ibid., 79.
106 Ibid., 47.
107 Ibid., 48.
Yet alongside this image of home, there appears an image of conquest. With Nicole, Renping imagines himself as a bandit in the Western movies, with Nicole being his horse and his sexual organ being his gun. His sexual power turns into his weapon to conquer his enemies in a foreign land while Nicole gives him confidence in his ambition to succeed in the West. Intriguingly, this image equates the stereotypical American outlaw with sexual domination, which is incongruent with the image of a comfortable and secure home as shown in the previous passage. His original American dream—to live comfortably with his wife and get a green card—yields to the fulfillment of his sexual desire. His fulfillment of personal desire and illusion of his potency and domination in a foreign land becomes home for him. However, the sense of “home” Nicole gives him is contained in a temporary, imagined space. If we interpret Nicole as a temporary home on Renping’s diasporic journey, this home is doomed to fail.

Renping’s desire for Nicole is constantly held back by his family responsibilities and cultural upbringing. Since youth Renping has been suppressing his desire: when he has wet dreams, nightmares and sweats as a boy, he does not tell anybody but changes his pants. When he grows up, he pretends to have no interest in women’s pretty faces, big breasts, big hips, or curves, yet his heart is filled with yearning. He even marries Peifen who is plain looking and has little sexual desire. His encounter with Nicole liberates him from the restraints he sets for himself, making him feel like a good strong man. But at the same time, his traditional thinking and his social responsibilities make him ashamed of his affair, and he “hope to sneak into the hole of a tree.” From his own fear, he feels as if Nicole were laughing at him: “Don’t you say you have a wife? Why do you send such an intimate message to a single woman? You

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108 Ibid., 49.
109 Ibid., 50.
deliberately speak to your wife in English, aren’t you telling another woman that you have no secret from her?”\textsuperscript{110} He is conflicted between being a loyal husband and following his desires. Driven by guilt, he tries to control his desire: neither smiling to her nor thinking about her big breasts.\textsuperscript{111} However, his longing grows when they are apart. Whenever he smells her body fragrance, he wishes he could get closer.\textsuperscript{112} His desire grows as if he were “controlled by a violent rogue who aggressively tramples on (his) will and principles.” Having been a faithful husband before his encounter with Nicole, Renping is unwilling to admit his own fault; instead, he blames Nicole: “it’s her seduction… [she] pushes me to the state of being raped; I do not want the erection, how is it different from rape?\textsuperscript{113} Blaming Nicole for his own arousal shows his unwillingness to accept that he has failed his role as a good husband.

Nicole challenges Renping’s traditional thoughts and ignites his sexual desires. However, when he comes to realize that his body is only a shell without women in his life,\textsuperscript{114} he decides to change. Afterwards Renping focuses on his own major and goes to the library every day. From that point on, he becomes very sensible, and loses the impulse to make love to Nicole.\textsuperscript{115} Nicole leaves America for Lisbon, leaving Renping a long letter, inviting him to join her in Lisbon. However, he puts her love letter into a drawer, and sees it only as memory. Compared with Peifen who actively pursues her desire, Renping resists his. His American dream has been settling down with Peifen in the United States, building a house and having children.

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 33.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 34.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 35.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 37.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 124.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 190.
Peifen’s gradual changes surprise and disappoint her husband Renping, who has expected her to be loyal and obedient. Peifen’s liberalness does not excite Renping, but scares him. Usually when they have sex they do not take off their clothes until they get into bed and they put on their clothes again immediately after sex. After her affair with Bailey, Peifen actively takes off her clothes. Seeing his wife naked lying beside him, Renping is shocked, imagining “the wax dripping from the side of the candle as if crying for (him).” He cannot help asking, “why would she expose her breasts and vagina… aren’t the clothes over our bodies what distinguishes human beings and animals?”  

Renping is very angry after seeing his wife’s photo on a magazine cover. Unable to accept that his wife is a model, he denies that the woman in the photo is his wife: “Not her, it’s not possible,” says he. Peifen’s change ruins the image of a good traditional wife in Renping’s mind, and further disillusiones his American dream.

Although living in Gracia’s house with Peifen, Renping does not forget his dream of building his own house and family. He sings: “It’s so far away when you think about it, as if it were all past; that unbreakable dream is still buried in heart.” Not long after Renping sings this song happily, Peifen gets angry at him for closing the windows and not letting the cooking smell out. “This is not our home!” she says angrily. She also adds that the reason why many Americans do not like to rent out their places to Chinese and Indians is that they cannot stand the smell of their cooking. Peifen’s words stress that they are living under an American’s roof and have to yield to those needs; she also shocks Renping with her courage to yell at him. “Where is

116 Ibid., 19.
117 Ibid., 120.
118 Ibid., 100.
119 Ibid., 102.
my Peifen? Why does this woman beside me become such a stranger? Renping asks himself. Peifen’s changes destroy that “unbreakable dream” in his heart that he sings about.

When Peifen develops her new personality and builds up her career, Renping can hardly recognize his wife. She transforms from a passive wife who always listens to him, to a dominatrix in sex and life. Early on in the novel Renping falls asleep while waiting for his wife and he has a suggestive dream: he dreams of himself walking out of his body, into a deserted land. He walks and walks; when he gets too tired to move, he sees a helicopter flying over him. Peifen is flying the helicopter to save him. He tries to catch the string Peifen throws to him, but he cannot catch it. This dream indicates that Peifen is flying further than he is, while he is trapped in the primitive land and hard to catch up. The rope she throws to him suggests that they want to reconnect but they are too far away from each other. The closer Peifen is walking to her own path and to the American family she works for, the further she is away from Renping, so too his dream that they could settle down with a green card and house together.

At the end of the novel when Peifen proposes to sleep in separate beds, he goes on a trip on his own, taking with him a vase, a friend’s present for their marriage. Both Nicole’s love letter and Peifen’s vase become emblems of his memories of the two women in his life—a Chinese wife and an American lover. His departure sets on a self-liberating journey without any woman. The ending seems desolate, yet the couple seems to realize that their home in diaspora is contained within themselves. And again, once they leave their homeland, the reconstruction of home is facilitated by them moving further and further away—a voluntary type of diaspora.

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120 Ibid., 103.
121 Ibid., 25.
The Chinese immigrants’ emotional attachments in their relationships indicate the emotional longings they have for their homeland and new land. In these novels the tension between security, traditional ideals, social constraints and adventure, American dream and personal desires are channeled through love and emotions. America and American lovers becomes a means by which Chinese immigrants realize and achieve their personal desires. At times American lovers represent illusionary American dreams to Chinese immigrants, such as Xiaohan’s gay friend, Renping and Peifen’s American lovers. On the other hand, Chinese lovers invoke a nostalgic love for their homeland. For Chinese immigrants in the stories examined in this chapter, lovesickness signifies homesickness: in *New York Lover* Xiaohan leaves her lover Gao in China yet fantasizes about him all the time in the United States; in *Good Morning America* the traditional faithful husband Huang Yaozong mourns his wife’s death and hopes to bring her ashes back to China; the husband Peining in *Listen to the Caged Bird Sing* agonizes over his wife’s abandonment of the family and draws closer attention to the trivialities of home once she is gone; the Chinese couple in *Notes of a Couple* frets about each other’s changes and loss of their traditional family ideals after moving in with an American family and developing their new selves.

The dramas the Chinese immigrants go through in their love lives in the new land portray the struggles of diasporic identities. Their love-seeking journey symbolizes their search for an identity and home in the new land. In these novels discussed in this chapter, love is a trope to represent a complex dynamic between home and diaspora (routes). Upon leaving their homeland, diasporic subjects feel homesick; at the same time, they feel sick of being in their old home because of their changing cultural values. In this conflict between being away from their old home and being in a new home, one straddles security and adventure, social constraints and
adventurous desires. In this dynamic the relationship between home and diaspora have changed. Diaspora could be a voluntary act immigrants choose to be physically or emotionally away from homeland, lover, or family; yet it also becomes a precondition for the new concept of home. In the global societies, one can no longer secure a sense of belonging (Home) in a physical space or geographical locale, but constantly locates and re-locates “home” away from home. In such a process diaspora becomes a medium for them constantly to reposition themselves between home/security and journey/adventure.
Chapter Four

Vulnerabilities of Home *En Route* and Multiple Homes — Ha Jin’s Immigrant Novels

This chapter, by examining the emotional struggles of the diasporic subjects, asks: If the home and identity *en route* suggested by current diasporic discourse describes the Chinese diaspora’s situation, could diasporic subjects be capable of inhabiting multiple identities in multiple homes? Could an *en route* identity and home indeed be a tactic for diasporic Chinese to cope with shattering cultural and literary boundaries? Could this approach solve the problem of the vulnerabilities of “home”?

While celebrating globalized transnational identities, scholars in diaspora studies undermine the pain of the deterritorialized identities that are constantly in the process of being made. Ha Jin’s two immigrant novels, *A Free Life* (2007) and *A Map of Betrayal* (2014) seem to challenge home and identity *en route*. If “diaspora” indicates a lasting sense of displacement, the characters in these two works demonstrate that, no matter how hard they try to cross geographical and cultural boundaries, the diasporic consciousness remains a significant part of their identity, hindering them from feeling at ease with their new locale. Therefore, searching for home does not offer them a home; rather, their home exists in the inner self, the self that heavily carries with it a heavy diasporic consciousness. In *A Free Life*, the protagonist finally withdraws from the attempt to find “home” in either land, but instead locates his “home” in poetry.

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1 The discussion on *A Free Life* in this chapter is partially based on my published article, but with some changes. See my “Home and Identity En Route in Chinese Diaspora—Reading Ha Jin’s *A Free Life*,” *Pacific Coast Philology* 49, 2 (2014): 203–20.
(literature), in a spiritual but not material world. Yet his diasporic experience becomes the main theme of his poetry. He rejects being a member of a diaspora in reality, yet his diasporic consciousness still significantly constitutes his spiritual home. In *A Map of Betrayal*, the protagonist vainly tries to inhabit two worlds by lying to/betraying himself. This demonstrates the uncomfortable juxtaposition of having different selves and embodying different identities. The existing mainstream diasporic discourse, which embraces diasporic and transnational identity, cannot explain the Chinese diaspora’s situation as presented in Ha Jin’s immigrant novels.

At the same time, both novels demonstrate that what essentially gives these diasporic subjects a sense of belonging is not so much physical locations as emotional connections with their lovers or with artistic creation. Current mainstream diaspora studies focus on the view that diasporic identities are constituted through negotiations between various cultures, but undermine the forces and struggles within diasporic subjects themselves. By looking into the emotional-social aspects in the chosen works, I hope to examine the diaspora’s inner selves and struggles, and to build a more solid connection between geographical/physical mappings and emotional-social aspects of diasporic experience.

In both novels, the Chinese diaspora’s fantasy of inhabiting dual homes and two identities has collapsed. Both novels present to us a melancholic version of “diaspora.” As in the last chapter, this chapter also challenges the existing optimistic view of diaspora in a transnational world. The characters in the novels typify paradoxes and contradictions: embodying multiple identities and denying that such a thing is even possible; celebrating a mobile conception of home while also portraying mobility as homelessness. They are hard to define or categorize because they themselves embody contradictions.
1. Ha Jin: From Soldier to Writer

Ha Jin was born in 1956 in Jinzhou, Liaoning Province in China. Following his father’s example as a military offer, he also joined the People’s Liberation Army at the age of fourteen. Stationed on China’s northeast border as an ammunitions handler, he witnessed both the Cultural Revolution and the brief war between China and the USSR. Not long after he left the army, the school he was attending closed down due to the Cultural Revolution. As a result he worked as a railroad telegraph operator for three years. When the colleges reopened in 1977, Ha Jin studied English literature in Heilongjiang University in Harbin, later earning an M.A. degree in American literature at Shandong University in 1984, where he studied T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and other “High Modernists.” He met his wife, Bian Lisha in these years. A year later he went to Brandeis University to pursue a PhD degree. He began writing his first volume of poetry in English while working as a night watchman at a chemical factory part-time. He planned to go back to China after his PhD studies but the Tian’anmen Massacre in 1989 changed his mind, and he became an American citizen a few years later. After gaining his PhD degree, Ha Jin was appointed Professor of Creative writing at Emory University, before joining Boston University in 2002. He was elected a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2005.

A productive writer, Ha Jin has written in a variety of genres. He has published three books of poetry: Between Silences (1990), Facing Shadows (1996), and Wreckage (2001). His

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Having experienced the difficult years in China during the Cultural Revolution, Ha Jin is well informed about the culture and history from the 1960s to the 1980s. Unlike Amy Tan, Maxine Hong Kingston, and several other Chinese American writers, Ha Jin is an immigrant. Compared with Tan and Kingston, whose knowledge of China is largely second-hand, Ha Jin’s narration is a more reliable cultural and social reflection. The intense experience of Communist control and the Cultural Revolution provides valuable source material for his works. His early writings such as *Ocean of Words: Army Stories* (1996), *Under the Red Flag* (1997), *The Bridegroom* (2000) and *Waiting* (1999) are heavily influenced and inspired by his experience in China.

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3 While recognizing that the representation of what is “Chinese” is part of the allure of works by many Chinese American writers, we should note that the understanding of China by American-born Chinese writers, such as Tan and Kingston, is mediated. A similar view is stated by Sau-ling Cynthia Wong: “I use the term ‘sugar sisterhood,’ then, to designate the kind of readership Amy Tan has acquired, especially among white women, through acts of cultural empathy that appear to possess the authority of authenticity but are often products of the American-born writer’s own heavily mediated understanding of things Chinese.” See Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, “‘Sugar Sisterhood’: Situating the Amy Tan Phenomenon,” in *Amy Tan’s The Joy Luck Club*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), 83.
With the historical setting of China during the 1960s to 1980s, Ha Jin’s early writings are devoted to portraying the “downtrodden” Chinese life under Communist rule. In the Preface to his first collection of poems *Between Silences*, Ha Jin writes: “As a fortunate one I speak for those unfortunate people who suffered, endured or perished at the bottom of life and who created the history and at the same time were fooled or ruined by it.”\(^4\) For Ha Jin, the purpose of writing is to give a voice to pain—the pain inflicted on the lives of oppressed Chinese who have suffered, endured or perished. He further explains in his essay, “The Spokesman and the Tribe,” that “I viewed myself as a Chinese writer who would write in English on behalf of the downtrodden Chinese.”\(^5\) And he views those downtrodden with a sympathetic eye, while casting a wary glance at the political situation that has led to their suffering: “Many of the characters I write about are people who have been twisted by life… Politics has something to do with it, but so does the time period in which they’ve lived and their environment. They are often people who have had little control over their own lives.”\(^6\)

In Ha Jin’s early works, these people “who have been twisted by life” and politics show his eagerness to speak for the people who are suppressed by the political regime. For example, his debut novel *In the Pond* (1998) is a portrait of a calligrapher who leads a downtrodden life at the Harvest Fertilizer Plant. *The Crazed* (2004), again, depicts the distressing life of a professor who raves about his past in a China convulsed by the Tiananmen crackdown. His most well-known novel *Waiting* (1999) depicts the suffering experienced during the Cultural Revolution. Although Ha Jin moves away from his role as a spokesman for his countrymen in later works, he

at times still writes about the suffering Chinese life. In his 2011 *Nanjing Requiem*, Ha Jin 
dramatizes the torture and fear the Chinese experienced during the Japanese invasion in the 
Nanjing Massacre.

In recent years Ha Jin has turned to writing about the lives of Chinese immigrants in the 
United States, starting with *A Free Life* (2007), followed by *A Good Fall* (2009), and his latest 
work *A Map of Betrayal* (2014). In these stories, he captures immigrants’ struggles to put down 
roots in their adopted land, and the interesting dynamics between their old and new identities. 
His literary trajectory as well as his own background present themselves as undetermined and 
oscillating, a phenomenon that will be discussed later in this chapter.

Ha Jin is the first Chinese American writer in America to win the National Book Award 
for Fiction, and he is one of the three non-native English speakers to be given this prize in the 
fifty-year history of the award. As well accepted as his works are in the United States, they are 
strictly restricted in Mainland China. Although all his novels have been translated into Chinese 
and published by Taiwanese publishers, only *Waiting* has been published in Mainland China thus 
far. Censorship comes into question whenever he attempts to have his books published. He 
signed five book contracts with a Shanghai publisher to publish four volumes of his fiction and a 
collection of poems in 2005. Unfortunately, two of them, *The Crazed* and *War Trash*, were 
rejected because of their “sensitive subjects”: the Tiananmen massacre and the Korean War. 
Later, *Under the Red Flag* was also banned by the Shanghai Censorship Office.

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7 The other two are Isaac Bashevis Singer and Jerzy Kosinski.

8 For a detailed discussion about the censorship of Ha Jin’s works, see Ha Jin, “The Censor in the Mirror: It’s Not 
Only What the Chinese Propaganda Department Does to Artists, but What It Makes Artists Do to Their Own Work,” 
2. Could Diaspora Have a “Free Life”?

*A Free Life* (2007) relates a Chinese immigrant family’s struggles to establish itself in America. The male protagonist, Nan, first travels to the United States for graduate studies in political science. Originally planning to return to China, the Tian’anmen Massacre changes Nan’s mind, and his family joins him to pursue the American Dream. The novel follows Nan’s struggles through a series of jobs in different cities. He works in a Chinese restaurant in New York’s Chinatown and later purchases one in Atlanta, evolving from tenant to owner, and from employee to employer. Nan’s dreams, however, are never primarily financial. He wants to be a poet, but the dulling minutiae of working nearly snuffs out that desire. Although he experiences difficulties and hostility as an immigrant, Nan eventually adapts to the new language and culture. Eventually, he is even able to return to poetry, the spiritual core of his life. This novel is not a tragedy, but demonstrates the complexities of Chinese immigrants’ pursuit of the American Dream. The Wus do not simply assimilate into mainstream culture, but must constantly renegotiate their self-identification and reconstitute their sense of home.

In this novel, the Wus have been through a trajectory of going back-and-forth, experiencing a pull-and-push between their homeland and adopted land. The old world (China) and the new world (America) both push the immigrants towards the other world and pull them back at the same time. Nan Wu is trying to establish his emotional belonging en route between China and America. The *en route* identity in current diasporic discourse celebrates the fluid boundaries of identities and the continuous, ongoing process of the making of home, yet the process the term describes fails to secure the sense of belonging that home is supposed to give.
While current diaspora scholars celebrate the possibility of a shifting conception of home and identity, they underplay the possible danger of this constant and multi-directional movement: a danger of losing one’s footing during that constant movement. Ha Jin’s works highlights the pain and struggles of deterritorialized identities that are constantly in the making. It represents diaspora as a site of struggles and impossibilities.

In the epilogue of *A Free Life*, which is meant to be a collection of the fictional Nan Wu’s poetry, we read the rich possibilities and freedom of a diasporic journey, like the young boy the poet observes drawing in the poem titled “Homework”: “Under his pencil a land is emerging. / He says, ‘I’m making a country’.”9 The title’s metaphor indicates that the concept of “home” could be a creation of one’s will and imagination. At the same time, the possibilities do not simply prevail over the pain and anxiety of such a shifting identity. Another of Nan’s poems, “An Exchange,” imagines a dialogue between a voice that condemns the poet for abandoning Chinese for English, and another that defends the choice. The critic accuses the poet of betraying “our people / scribbling with the alphabet / out of contempt for our ancient words / which stand like rocks in time’s river.” The poem, through the voice of an unnamed critic, characterizes the choice to write in English as a choice to condemn China, disdaining, dismissing, and discarding that nation’s long history and tradition. The poet counters, “Our words, yes, once like a river, / have shrunk into a man-made pond / in which you are kept, half alive / as a pet to obey and entertain.”10 This statement makes a counter accusation, criticizing the nation for silencing minority voices and through political repression. These two parts of the poem present a dialogue within the self—the same individual living the battle internally, leading to a lonely synthesis in

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10 Ibid., 658.
the poem’s final stanza: “To write in this language is to be alone, / to live on the margin where / loneliness ripens into solitude.”\textsuperscript{11} While filled with space and the possibility to create art, the diasporic journey puts its subjects “on the margin.” This stanza suggests reaching the majority audience at the cost of leaving themselves in a lonely, marginalized position.

Through exploring the emotional deconstruction and re-construction of the immigrant family in \textit{A Free Life}, the following section looks at how the novel dramatizes the creative possibilities and anxious struggles of a diasporic journey. This journey does not move in one direction or exist in a single dimension; rather, it is a complicated construct consisting of the multi-dimensional movements and the shifting natures of multiple variables.

When the Wus first arrive in the United States, they have a hard time situating themselves in a different culture; their fresh memories of homeland pull their attention and gaze toward China. The wife of the protagonist Nan, Pingping, misses places like “the mountain outside the small town where she had grown up.” Proud of her native land, she vigorously defends it in conversation and will not allow any offense to China to be pronounced in America,\textsuperscript{12} and their son wails when he is sent abroad: “I don’t want to be American.”\textsuperscript{13} Both the mother and the son cling to their Chinese identities and memories of their homeland.

While Pingping’s longing centers on landscape and family, Nan’s fixes on his previous girlfriend, Beina. She occupies his mind, becoming part of an imaginary landscape of his past, an unobtainable object of nostalgia and fascination. Before he emigrated, Beina rejected Nan’s

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 659.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 49.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 12.
proposal and married another man who could buy her a red Yamaha scooter.\textsuperscript{14} Before the rejection, Beina had inspired Nan’s poetry: “When he had just fallen in love with Beina, he had written more than a hundred poems, all of which came with ease.”\textsuperscript{15} The fantasized Beina who occupies Nan’s mind drives him back to China to look for her. Searching for Beina means metaphorically searching for his roots for years.

Interestingly, his are not accurate memories of a historical place and time. For instance, when visiting his parents in China, he urges them to make the “homely food” of his childhood. But the dishes of “millet porridge” and “fried toon leaves” fail to satisfy: “Everything tasted different from what he’d remembered. Maybe he’d lost some taste buds. Or maybe all the memories of those toothsome foods were just the remaining sensations of his childhood.”\textsuperscript{16}

These recollections are as much an imaginative product as the family memories of Maxine Hong Kingston’s narrator in \textit{The Woman Warrior}. Tinted by his romantic love, Nan’s homeland is just as imaginary as a second or third generation Chinese-American’s vision of China.

While visiting China, Nan learns that Beina has also emigrated to the United States. Although Nan cannot see Beina anymore, the emotional affection Nan has for Beina stays and echoes the relationship they used to have. When they finally meet again in America, Beina summarizes her impact on Nan: “\textit{For a man like you, the first love is always the flame consuming your heart. You cannot stop your torch song.}”\textsuperscript{17} As his first love, Beina has her “hooks” in Nan, and she cannot be easily expelled, any more than the enduring fantasy of his homeland that she

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 59.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 61.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 557.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 589. The italics in the original text implies that the characters are speaking Chinese.
represents. Like a siren’s song, the promise of a return to an idealized homeland continually beckons and pulls the Wus back toward China. Despite the lack of physical connection, Nan still retains the love for Beina (who embodies his Chinese homeland) because of the implicit link he creates for himself. Rather than Beina herself, Nan may be in love with romance and longing itself. And her absence enhances his emotions.

China serves as the object of their longing, whereas their Chinese identity becomes a barricade keeping them from integrating into the mainstream American society. In the midst of the Wus’ hard work, they frequently feel ashamed of being Chinese and receive disdain from whites. Nan and Pingping’s struggle with English further prevents them from integrating into the dominant culture. Nan’s funny pronunciation and Pingping’s grammatical mistakes show their incomplete assimilation into the new society. Even their son Taotao “had been simmering, angry about their awkward English.” Because of the daily hard work and poor English, Nan is deprived of his main desire and ambition to be a strong and successful man, rendering him an impotent male figure. Once he is even taken to be female by an American. His friend explains that his name must sound like a female name in English, as in “Nancy and Nanny and Nanette,” like a “diminutive of Anne and Anna.” The word nan in Chinese pinyin means “man.” In China his name casts him as a masculine master of the household, but in America the same name feminizes him. The Chinese name, which indicates his Chinese identity and had given him a sense of pride, now in America becomes a source of shame. Nan sighs, “If only he and his wife

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18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 102.
20 Ibid., 5.
21 Ibid., 195.
22 Ibid., 458.
could break off with China altogether and squeeze every bit of it out of themselves!” The Chineseness they embody keeps them from fully integrating into the new society.

In *A Free Life*, the new land does alienate immigrants, frustrating and displacing them. And memories of the old land, friends and family, a familiar culture, pull new immigrants back to their homeland. But this is not a simple dynamic. While the Wus’ homeland serves as a myth for them to pursue, the backwardness and restrictions in China push them away from home and set them traveling to a new land. The Tian’anmen Incident severs the Wus’ ties to China. They cannot see justice or hope there; Pingping tells her friend Janet, “in China, officials’ job is to make people suffer.” Nan’s poems are rejected by editors in China because they are considered “too sensitive politically.” He comes to believe that honesty is not valued in China: “You have to lie constantly because everyone else lies.” The political restrictions described here reduce Chinese citizens like Nan to objects lacking agency, preventing them from pursuing their dreams.

Moreover, as diasporic subjects change in their journey, their homeland changes too. The homeland which initially sets immigrants moving, or that pulls them back, changes. Whether the real conditions in their homeland change, or merely their perceptions of those conditions, the homeland can no longer sustain their longing. As time passes, the concrete images they long for become a blurred, imaginary fiction, just like Beina, Nan’s previous girlfriend in China. His homeland becomes displaced along the course of Nan’s migration. For instance, when Beina

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23 Ibid., 50.
24 Ibid., 337.
25 Ibid., 409.
26 Ibid., 555.
moves to America, she does so without informing him. If we read Beina as representing Nan’s imagined homeland, her move suggests the relocation of those roots. Upon seeing her in America, Nan is disappointed to find her changed, which shatters his image of her. The present-day Beina is a middle-aged woman with wrinkles: “She seemed subdued—the fire, the coquetry, and the insouciance that had once set his entire being aflame were no longer there.” Nan begins to understand the myth he has built around Beina and the impossibility of ever realizing his dream of being with her.

In that same way, the Wus begin to understand the myth of China that they have created in their minds. In the novel, the Wus have been occupied with the memories of their homeland and their homeland experience. It is this imagined homeland that becomes the destination of “the myth of return,” to use Safran’s language. While the ancestral homeland melts into only a fantasized origin, however, Chinese immigrants’ impulse to return home can never be satisfied. Return in a physical sense is possible, as in Nan’s visit to China; yet a satisfying emotional return is hardly possible, remaining always out of reach in the imagination of diaspora. The emotional connection to China that is imagined in the Wus’ early immigrancy is thereby lost.

The impossibility of such a return is demonstrated in Nan’s disappointment when he attempts to revisit his family and Beina in China. He finds, when he physically returns, that “Beijing is hardly recognizable,” and Chinese food at home is not as enjoyable as he expects. He is disappointed, telling his wife, “I felt out of place wherever I went in China. Trash, trash

\[27\] Ibid., 563.
\[28\] Ibid., 587.
\[29\] Ibid., 530.
\[30\] Ibid., 557.
everywhere, so many places were like a garbage dump. I had an awful time, awful." \(^{31}\) The homeland that he remembers and recognizes is gone, or rather, the experience of the new land raises his expectation of the homeland that cannot be met in reality. Nan’s disappointment does not arise from the reality of Beijing’s change, but his expectation of Beijing staying the same, matching the image he holds of the city in his mind. The longing for an object and place is dependent on its meeting the longing subject’s expectation. This explains the particular instability of diasporic subjects’ longing, as the imagination of their homeland does not evolve with the changing situations of their homeland during their absence from it.

The realization that this imagined homeland does not exist forces the Wus to relocate themselves in a new land not just physically but also emotionally. Although the Wus cannot fully detach themselves from their homeland, they soon attempt an active re-rooting by their own will: “The Wus, having no recourse to a place they could call home, had to put down roots here.” \(^{32}\) At the same time, the new world pulls them and encourages them to put down roots with a promising dream of economic freedom, and the possibility of new identities, what might be loosely called the American dream. Early in the novel, Yafang, a girl from Shanghai, explains the desire to come to America, “for a better life . . . there’s freedom.” \(^{33}\) Even Nan’s mom, who has never been to America, sees it as “the richest land,” \(^{34}\) which she hopes to visit before she dies. \(^{35}\) Such factors propel the Chinese diaspora. Time and time again, Nan expresses his wish that he had come to America earlier: “If some American family had adopted me when I was an

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 573.
\(^{32}\) Ibid., 297.
\(^{33}\) Ibid., 132.
\(^{34}\) Ibid., 551.
\(^{35}\) Ibid., 558.
infant, I could have become a movie star, or at least a CEO.”\textsuperscript{36} Although sarcastic, the comment expresses a belief echoed by other Chinese characters who paint America as a dreamland, “a place of our future.”\textsuperscript{37} The Wus particularly pray that their son will Americanize and become assimilated quickly: “(Nan) was sure that, eventually, the boy would become an American . . . they must live in this country to let their son grow into an American . . . take this land to be his country!”\textsuperscript{38} Their hope for their son Taotao symbolizes their hope for the future, which they purposely set in the United States. Metaphorically and physically locating their son in America marks the destination of their wandering.

The title of the book, \textit{A Free Life}, reflects how much the perception of the idea of America is governed by the idea of freedom, which can be represented by one’s ability to “reinvent oneself”—to claim agency in a new land. This personal liberation becomes the essential element of the American Dream, giving immigrants new hopes they have been deprived of in China. The Wus up-root themselves from China and re-root themselves in America. But rather than roots, which implies settled permanence, it is the “homonym routes,”\textsuperscript{39} as Paul Gilroy defines the concept in his influential work \textit{The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness} that best explains how Nan’s home and his idea of homeland is re-constituted through movement. The Wus travel back and forth between Chinese and American cultures.

In the pull and push trajectory between his old land (China) and new world (America), the Wus’ identities are always in the making as their “home” is being reconstituted. The

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 355.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 495.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 9.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Paul Gilroy, \textit{The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 19.
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push/pull factors complicate questions of identity for Chinese diaspora like the characters in *A Free Life*, and generate a multiplicity of identities and identifications—sometimes Chinese, sometimes American, sometimes Chinese-American. Nan’s vacillating emotional connection with China and America shows that the Wus’ diasporic experience is a shifting ground for their multiple identities, while also demonstrating the limits of such experience: in the course of forming deterritorialized identities, they are pushed towards the edge of geographical and social boundaries. Instead of being subjects capable of occupying multiple spaces, they become the ones who are pushed away from all spaces and forced to withdraw from all. Therefore, they are forced to locate home in something besides nation or family. They fail to locate a home along their diasporic route, only to end up in the absence from all these spaces. Jerry A. Varsava argues that the title “A Free Life” suggests “both a celebration of opportunity in America and a reproach of official Chinese repression.”⁴⁰ Yet I think the title is being ironic about the promises of diaspora’s *en route* identity. Superficially, it looks as if diasporic subjects could attain a free life on their diasporic route, but indeed, the novel suggests the opposite. Nan is alienated from both countries and unable to anchor home anywhere *en route* but in his own literary creation.

After being in the United States for some time, Nan realizes: a survival tactic for diasporic subjects is being a free agent detached from any country. One time he says to his countrymen, “You people always talk about your nation, your China, as if every one of you were a kingpin of that country. Has it ever occurred to you that this obsession is dangerous? I mean to let a country dominate an individual’s life and out-weigh everything else.”⁴¹ Instead of locating his emotional belonging to any country, Nan seeks an internal belonging to fulfill himself, one

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⁴¹ Ha Jin, *A Free Life*, 496.
centered in his poetry and his family. On his diasporic route, the physical locations do not give him a sense of “home,” but what really offers him belonging is his own creation, as the poem quoted in Nan’s collection at the end of the novel states, “You must go to a country without borders;” that is, a country, a limitless homeland, of their own creation.

3. Life of an Immigrant, Life of a Spy

Ha Jin’s 2014 immigrant novel *A Map of Betrayal* tells the story of Gary Shang, who appears to be a perfect example of a successful Chinese immigrant—he has a decent job and an upper-middle class apartment, married an American woman, and has an American daughter in the United States. He seems to be completely integrated into American society. However, Gary hides a secret: he has been spying for the Chinese government, and is a mole buried deep inside the CIA. So in many ways *A Map of Betrayal* appears to be about national identity; however, the novel in the end shows that nationality is a poor place to found a sense of home. Gary begins to adopt America as his own country, yet he also loves his home country. In the end the Chinese government abandons him and the American government puts him in jail. The novel tells Gary’s story through his daughter, who is a trained historian. Her retelling of her father’s stories not only rediscovers his history as a spy but also uncovers their family history. It is about a complex web of relationships, contingent on longing, love and betrayal. This section explores Gary’s emotional connections with China, his motherland, and America, his new land, and with his Chinese and American families. These connections reveal the longing and pain that Gary’s double life creates.

In this novel Gary develops two selves in his diasporic journey: one is his hidden self,
empty, lonely and restricted, constantly longing and desiring his homeland; the other is his created self, a façade he casts himself in America. Weimin and Gary, the same person with two different names, embody his Chinese and American selves. Gary tries to inhabit double identities in both lands; yet in this process his sense of home and identity shatter. His success in the United States is a façade. His love for America and his American wife becomes a contingency of his fake identity in the United States, because it represents immigrants’ common desire and the American dream.

Gary starts out as a passive figure, not very patriotic but drifts into being a spy, mainly pushed by the Colonel Bingwen who later acts as his handler when he is applying for jobs. When he is away from China, his distance from his family strengthens his imagination of China, so he embraces the idea that someday he would return home with glory and he would be celebrated in China for his work. He then talks of himself as a patriot, but over the course of time he changes further, and develops feelings for America. Gradually he feels himself belonging to both lands and sees his spying as a method to bridge both countries by keeping them from having conflicts with each other. Later he finds out that this dooms him to failure as he is denounced by both countries. Narrated from the perspective of Gary’s daughter, the novel is ambivalent about whether Gary is really loyal to the two lands or it’s just a lie with which he tries to delude himself.

Gary’s whole life in America is a cover story, a lie. As it is in Chang Rae Lee’s *Native Speaker* (1996), the role of “spy” in this novel is significant. A spy must fully inhabit another self—a “legend” that conceals and buries the authentic self. Thus, Ha Jin gives us Weimin and Gary, one person with two different names. In doing so, he provides an interesting commentary on the habit of Chinese immigrants to adopt American names, whether that happens to
accommodate Americans who are frequently unable to pronounce Chinese names correctly, or to prevent anti-immigrant prejudice, or to recreate the self in a new country. In Gary’s case, taking on the profession of the spy in the United States means abandoning, or appearing to abandon, his Chinese self, Weimin. Completely in disguise, he marries an ordinary American woman and hides from her that he has a family in China. Meanwhile he is constantly lying to others about his real intentions, desires, anxieties and identity.

Neither Gary’s material success, nor his American wife Nellie, represents a real love for or satisfaction with America. As a Chinese spy working in the CIA, Gary tries to blend in to avoid drawing attention to himself. Thus his marriage to Nellie comes at the suggestion of his Chinese handler; the marriage will secure his American residency and better cover his identity. When he meets his American wife, Nellie, he considers her plainness to be an advantage because it would decrease the possibility that she might flirt with other men. Unlike his relationship with his wife Yufeng or his mistress Suzie, Gary’s relationship with Nellie is superficial and materialistic. Nellie tolerates his life outside their home as long as he can take care of the family financially. She turns a blind eye to his affair with Suzie and later starts her own affair with her boss. Finally Gary’s little communication with and lack of affection for Nellie turn into anger, impatience and confrontation. Once he hits Nellie, when she shows impatience with their daughter, and remains unapologetic. However, Nellie’s daughter Lilian is the biggest reason for Gary’s attachment to America. She represents Gary’s transnational ideal, a person who can fully inhabit, without contradiction, both Chinese and American identities. In her daughter Gary sees a hope to be embraced as American himself. Gary’s love for his American daughter is a means by

43 Ibid., 121.
which his fake identity in the United States is performed. To live a lie in America does not satisfy Gary; rather, it only fulfills a superficial understanding, common to many Chinese immigrants at the time, that America means financial and material prosperity. The gulf between his material success and mental suppression makes him feel emotionally displaced in the United States. “Home” (America) to him is constructed through a paradox of physical and mental conditions: He is there (physically) and not there (mentally).

But his feelings for America change over time. Lilian’s nephew Ben talks about America as a place that is “very seductive and corruptive,” and can “suck you in and make you forget who you are and where you’re from.”44 In the beginning Gary resists the seduction of America and is only pretends to fall in love with it. He gradually changes to fit the mask he makes for himself.45 The more he blends into American culture the more worried he gets, because his integration will make it harder to detach from the new land and place him further away from his country and what he thinks of as his real self.

But he cannot help being drawn into the new land: “he’d begun to be fond of this place, where he had a secure, decent job and a comfortable home with a little flower garden.”46 In a speech that he makes after getting an award for his distinctive service to the CIA, he seems genuinely to embrace and appreciate this America which took him in and gave him a family and a home.47 Although the speech is meant to fit his fake identity, it catches him by surprise by

44 Ibid., 155.
45 This metaphor comes from George Orwell’s 1936 essay “Shooting an Elephant.”
46 Ha Jin, A Map of Betrayal, 197.
47 Ibid., 223.
echoing a feeling deep within his heart that he does not even realize is there. Gary’s loyalty and affection towards America grows in the course of his American life.

“Home” or China, on the other hand, is a mental construct developed, in part, through nostalgia for his homeland and in part, through anxieties about the absence of his family in China and concern for their well-being. His connection to China is natural; the connection to America is artificial, until it begins to become natural. At the same time, the connection to China begins to become more forced, more artificial. It progresses throughout the novel. His daughter Lilian tries to uncover family history through Gary’s diaries. In order fully to inhabit the lie of his cover story, Gary must suppress his memories of China. Yet Lilian doubts if he actually enjoys American life. She believes he has lived a “tangled existence”: in America, he appears to suppress his Chinese identity but inside he holds on to his Chinese identity and memories of his country and family. His daughter Lillian says, “at times it was hard for me to penetrate the armor of detachment he had clothed himself in.”48 The detachment from China is part of this armor. Inside the armor one finds his longing for home, his responsibilities for his family in China, his affection towards his Chinese mistress, Suzie.

While enjoying the material success he has in America and some aspects of American life—“the orderliness, the plenitude, the privacy, the continuity of daily life, the freedom of travel”—Gary’s mind is still occupied with China: “For him, happiness lay elsewhere, and he could visualize it only in his homeland and in the reunion with his original family.”49 The United States satisfies his desire for material security, but only his connection with his homeland and family in China fulfills his emotional needs. In the United States, he not only constantly feels

48 Ibid., 188.
49 Ibid., 135.
lonely, but also lives in fear. His profession as a spy deprives him of security. He wishes he could “return to China soon and again walk on solid, familiar ground.”50 His American experience, more perilous than lucky, more uncertain and anxious than stable, forces him to wobble on uncertain ground. He believes that a return to China will place him back on solid ground; this thought, however, is nothing but a fantasy.

Gary slowly realizes that his longing to return to China would never be achieved and his love for the Chinese nation is not reciprocated by its government. For example, Gary had fathered twins with his first wife, but left China, without even knowing that his wife is pregnant. The Chinese government withholds news of the births knowing that Gary would immediately want to return to Yufeng to help raise their family. Because of the government, Gary cannot keep the promises and commitments he made to Yufeng as her husband. Later when Yufeng leaves her home village in 1961, the Chinese government even stops sending Gary’s salary to her. Worse still, Gary cannot return to his home country for a visit. The news that he could not go back to China and see his family saddens him, yet it is not until he goes to Hong Kong for an assignment that he finds out the government had stopped sending money to his Chinese family. The strict rules of the Chinese government paralyze his will to do anything. Unable to connect with his Chinese family members, Gary feels guilty because he believes he treats them unfairly, yet tries to convince himself that he is making a sacrifice to serve his country. He falls under the illusion that he will be celebrated as a hero in China. Gradually, however, Gary’s enforced isolation from his Chinese family breaks his spirit. His love for his homeland drains away and he just does his duty routinely.51

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50 Ibid., 73.
51 Ha Jin, A Map of Betrayal, 209.
Gary’s handler, Bingwen, sees Gary as a patriot who loves China and has done the country a great service. And indeed Gary always hopes for the best for his home country and makes tremendous efforts to serve it. While working for the CIA, Gary deliberately mistranslates important documents to serve the interests of the Chinese government better. For example, in translating Chinese official documents into English, he chooses “determination” over “will,” “fight back” over “resist” to strengthen the tones of the sentences, lessening the chance of conflicts between the two countries, he believes. He makes his best effort to bridge the relationship between China and the United States and feels excited when that relationship improves. While conducting espionage, Gary constantly warns China about dangerous situations and the possibility of being attacked by foreigners, if they fail to strengthen their military. He wishes China would empower itself on hearing those warnings.

Despite his tremendous contribution to China, after his espionage is discovered, many people from both sides see him as betraying his country and family. Lilian thinks that citizens are required to be loyal to their country only if their country can provide them with shelter; otherwise migration should be a legitimate right. She explains to her nephew Ben in her visit to China when she is tracing her family history:

I believe that a country is not a temple but a mansion built by the citizens so they can have shelter and protection in it. Such a construction can be repaired, renovated, altered, and even overhauled if necessary. If the house isn’t suitable for you, you should be entitled to look for shelter elsewhere. Such freedom of migration will make the government responsible for keeping the house safe and more habitable for its citizens.  

52 Ibid., 151.
Her explanation defends Gary from the charge that his naturalization is a betrayal to China. In her eyes, patriotism should be built upon the condition that the country has not betrayed individuals or violated some basic principles of humanity. Since the Chinese government has failed to protect its people from riots, Chinese citizens should have the freedom to migrate to other countries.

Gary mentally “stays with” his homeland even though it fails to reciprocate his love or to ensure the safety and wealth of his Chinese family. Mentally leaving his homeland would mean recognizing that his beliefs that he is serving his homeland, staying loyal to it, and bringing it glory are all illusions, would lead to the realization that his life’s investment in his nation has no value. He loves his country, not for what it is, but for his own vision of what it could have been. Sara Ahmed, in her Cultural Politics of Emotion, points out that love could be a powerful emotion even in the lack of reciprocity because the unreturned love actually affirms that the emotion is meaningful.53 Like many other immigrants, Gary quickly develops homesickness once he takes on his job and is forced to be isolated from his Chinese family. Merely a few years after he leaves China, “his homesickness had grown into a kind of numbness, a dull pain deep in his heart.”54 Gary gets accustomed to the pain of loss and the feeling of homesickness when his longing to return home is constantly denied. For him, the pain of homesickness develops into an obsession with his longing and but also an impetus for his patriotism.

The map of betrayal in this novel is not a one-dimensional diagram of China betraying Gary, Gary betraying America, or vice versa; but it is a more multi-layered construct based on

54 Ha Jin, A Map of Betrayal, 54.
Gary’s complicated emotional connections with and disconnections from both countries. This complicated map manifests itself in Gary’s personal love relationships.

Just as Beina functions for Wu Nan in *A Free Life*, Gary’s Chinese wife serves as a “thread” that ties him to his homeland. Throughout the novel he demonstrates deep affection and longing for his Chinese wife. Although Gary never sees her after leaving China many years before, he never stops thinking about her. Yufeng’s absence strengthens their bond.\(^55\) Her daughter believes that “she was rooted in his consciousness.”\(^56\) Even when with his American wife, Nellie, Gary is “shadowed by the memories of his other wife.”\(^57\) He sometimes wishes that Yufeng would find another man, feeling that such a betrayal might possibly compensate for his sense of guilt. His Chinese wife, Yufeng, fits into an ideal image of the traditional Chinese woman. When she runs into a man she is attracted to, Uncle Weifu, she moves away to avoid him. She remains “a good wife” and protects the family name. Yufeng embodies an idealized wife and a sense of “home” in his mind even though he only spends a month with her before they depart for China.

From that short time together, Gary builds an imagined version of Yufeng. When he first leaves China, “he would replay her words and actions in his mind. Some of her phrases and facial expressions had been growing mysterious and more vivid, pregnant with meanings he couldn’t decipher.”\(^58\) Perseverating on these memories does not create a clearer, more coherent

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\(^{55}\) Ibid., 25.
\(^{56}\) Ibid., 211.
\(^{57}\) Ibid., 104.
\(^{58}\) Ibid., 25.
picture of Yufeng; instead his imagination begins to create signs and meanings where none were before. His mind turns some vague memories into codes he hopes to decipher someday.

Yet his memories of her are not always pleasant, but sometimes involve fear and anger: “in the middle of the night he’d awake with a start, feeling his wife standing at the head of his bed and observing him. Her breathing was ragged while her eyes radiated resentment.”59 His imagination of his wife’s rage and resentment suggests his sense of guilt. Once he dreams that she hurts herself and is hospitalized,60 making him downcast for days. The thought of his family in China and his inability to take care of them pains him. Thinking about her wounds and resentment, Gary seems to ask himself constantly: Was it right to leave his family behind in China? Is it fair to his Chinese wife? What could he do to make it up to them? When Nellie gives birth to Lillian, Gary insists on using the first character from his Chinese wife’s name, “Yu,” as his daughter’s middle name,61 as if the baby might carry on his memories of Yufeng and his Chinese home. He believes, by doing so, that his first wife would own part of this American baby. Deep down, Gary hopes Yufeng might share his American life. Once he even dreams of her speaking English to him.62 Yet this is nothing but a wish, since Yufeng could only share a small amount of his salary, which is ended during the great famine in China. Gary’s material success does nothing to reduce his complex feelings for his Chinese wife and homeland.

Gary’s Chinese mistress, Suzie, on the other hand, represents his emotional longing for a home that is trapped inside him in his memory. Suzie is able to articulate a feeling that she and

59 Ibid.
60 Ibid., 211.
61 Ibid., 61.
62 Ibid., 211.
Gary share: “No matter where I go, I always feel I’m Chinese…I mean something inside me cannot be changed, was already shaped and fixed in China.”63 Although Suzie is an American citizen, she identifies herself as Chinese and believes that this identity is internally fixed. Gary delights at these words, feeling that she is speaking his mind. Their shared trauma and open wounds caused by alienation from their homeland bring them close to each other. With her, Gary can emerge from behind his disguise and share stories that he thinks of as authentic, because they are spoken without the pressure to “perform” as a devoted and loyal American. Free from the fear of judgment, from the restrictions of an immigrant identity that they have to perform (happy, well-adjusted, fully integrated), they fearlessly throw themselves into their affair: “Engulfed in the whirlwind of desire, they’d lost the sense of shame and shed the armor of self-respect.”64 He feels his marriage to Nellie as cheating on Yufeng but he doesn’t feel that way about his affair with Suzie. Their affair is an escape from the isolation and loneliness they feel in a foreign country, and is “for the sake of self-preservation.”65 In Lilian’s view, Suzie abandons herself to the man she loves and cherishes, which Lilian describes as her being an admirable slave of love/devotion. I would argue, however, that rather than abandoning herself to love, Suzie gives herself to an ideal which creates in her empathy with lonely and alienated Gary, and a shared sense of homesickness. The emotional and physical connection between Gary and Suzie is a space of relief they create for themselves to survive in the difficult diasporic life. Gary’s emotional connection with his Chinese wife and Suzie sustains his fantasy of China, and establishes an image of “home” in his psyche. In appearance he lives a happy, contented life in America while imagining himself as loyal to his original homeland and hoping to bring home

63 Ibid., 139.
64 Ibid., 140.
65 Ibid.
glory someday. Yet all these beliefs are lies; to his wives; to his countries; and to himself, the final victim of his betrayals.

Gary’s Chinese self is only publicly unveiled in his daughter’s narrative. In the act of writing his story, Lilian is in dialogue with her father, a process of discovery that delights her, and moves from researching his story to finishing the business he left undone. The narrative alternates between her father’s diaries and her own journey to China to search for her stepfamily. In her journey, Lilian reunites with her father’s Chinese family, trying to help them understand his motivations, emotions and affections towards them as if it were her duty to justify his choices. She goes beyond explaining, and attempts to bring Gary’s Chinese family together, rebuilding what was broken in Gary’s lifetime. She supports her nieces’ careers and performances and gives sincere advice to her nephew Ben. Through these actions, Lilian’s journey partially makes up for what is lost in Gary’s dream— to reunite with his Chinese family and to take care of them.

There is the question of ambiguity, however, about the authenticity of the diaries. Because Lilian admits that she writes “in her own fashion,” we yet do not know how much interpretation she adds to her father’s original diaries. Whatever the extent of her additions or interpretations is, her narrative unveils the authentic Chinese self that he had been forced to hide and disguise throughout his lifetime.

Gary deceives himself not only with his patriotism and his persistent longing for his ancestral home, but also with the possibility of inhabiting and embracing multiple homes and identities. In order to cover his conflicted identities, Gary casts himself as a peacemaker who
really has a dual allegiance: “The two countries are like parents to me.” In her *Double Agency*, Tina Chen proposes impersonation as a paradigm for understanding Asian Americans’ multiple allegiances to various countries. This notion challenges the binaries of loyalty/disloyalty, real/fake and Asian/American, and instead reconsiders Asian Americans as double agents. Ha Jin’s protagonist seems to embody the tactic of impersonation. But deep inside he is deeply conflicted and is an empty shell, without any solid sense of himself. While deceiving himself about his family and professional life, Gary relinquishes his own agency by playing the roles he is given to play: as a husband devoted to an American wife, as a Chinese American and model of assimilation, and as a CIA translator loyal to America. His ambition to inhabit dual identities and dual allegiances leads to multiple anxieties: as a Chinese husband feeling guilty about neglecting his Chinese family, as a husband to Nellie who takes advantage of her as a cover, as a spy worrying about his real identity being revealed. A responsible husband, a loving man, a reliable translator and an accomplished spy: he is all of these as well as none of these.

Unlike what the Chinese government promises and he himself believes will happen, Gary fails to go home to receive honor and glory. When the FBI arrests and convicts Gary, the Chinese ambassador does not defend him, but denies that he has any ties with China. Gary, who has served his country for many years, is not defended but discarded, and eventually convicted and sentenced to 120 years in prison. Regardless of his past contributions, the Chinese government does not show any concern for Gary. The only response to his unrequited patriotism is an unsympathetic denial of his loyalty. His life proves that his dual loyalties fail to be a remedy for his loss and conflicted identities. Gary chooses to commit suicide: he

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“smothered himself with a trash bag tied around his neck with two connected shoestrings.”

Sadly, this is the only decision he makes for himself after he takes on his spy job: to die quietly. The end result of his attempt to inhabit dual identities is a withdrawal from life. Gary’s attempt to connect with China and the United States ends with isolation from anywhere he endeavors to connect with. Eventually, he becomes a “stranded traveler,” in Lilian’s words, someone who could not settle down anywhere mentally.68 His attempt to situate home en route between China and America boils down to homelessness. His sense of belonging has been disrupted by the double identities he attempts to occupy, a tragic ending that suggests the failure of a dream of being attached and loyal to two homes, two countries. Gary ultimately becomes a victim of the messy tangle of his multiple betrayals.

Like Gary, Lilian hopes to inhabit dual identities: in the States, she wants to be an American; and in China she wants to be the same as anyone else. Yet after learning a lot about present-day China and the changes it is undergoing, Lilian realizes this hope is nothing more than a fantasy. Lilian, in her experience of teaching in China, has learned that nation’s essential values, such as the idea of “national sovereignty” being upheld and promoted.69 Citizens are expected to serve the motherland. But Lilian’s students admire and pursue freedom and individualism in Western society. As an invited guest in Lilian’s school, Prof. Wei Fang, while giving a speech espousing China taking over the Internet, is yelled at by students to leave the stage.70 In the novel the young people in China consider the tennis player Li Na as a hero, because she does not identify herself with any nationality but succeeds on her own. The students

67 Ibid., 264.
68 Ibid., 103.
69 Ibid., 129.
70 Ibid., 130.
in Lilian’s school gather to watch Li Na playing the final match in the French Open in Paris. When she wins the Grand Slam, she says in her acceptance speech, “don’t talk about bringing honor to our country. I’m competing for myself.”\textsuperscript{71} The individuality and self-esteem advocated here present a stark contrast to what was expected in Gary’s generation.

Similarly, Lilian’s nephew Ben is pessimistic about the very idea of loving a nation. He thinks it is Gary’s mistake to have lived life like a “divided man,”\textsuperscript{72} loving both China and the United States. For Ben, attachment to any country is not beneficial. Following Gary’s example, Ben also takes up working as a spy. With Lilian’s help, he tries to learn about his grandfather’s life. In the end he leaves Boston with his lover Sonya. Unlike Gary, Ben fears loving two countries and being torn between them. Instead of trying to claim loyalty and attachment to either country or both countries as Gary had, he chooses to live a life “as an independent man, also as a man without a country.”\textsuperscript{73} He feels satisfied and “at home” as long as Sonya is with him. The joys and sorrows of their life are the only things that mean “home” to him. Instead of trying to anchor himself in multiple homes, he chooses to disassociate himself from any national identity. He finds his emotional belonging in his individual freedom and personal love.

Lilian’s experience and Ben’s choice suggest a pessimistic view of diaspora and the impossibility of inhabiting multiple identities and homes. Diasporic subjects who embrace multiple homes emotionally cannot be part of the construct of nation and nationality. The novel’s version of Deng Xiaoping unsympathetically comments about Gary, “let that selfish man rot in

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 132.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 212.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 279.
an American prison together with his silly dream of being loyal to both countries,“74 cruelly excludes Gary from being part of the national body. China demands complete loyalty from its citizens. Deng seems to believe that that embodying double loyalties and double identities block rather than serve the national cause. The voluntary legal and cultural acceptance of other nations as their homeland becomes a reason for expelling the diasporic Chinese from China’s national body. Therefore they betray not only the Chinese nation but also of the intact ideal of nationality and identity.

In both *A Free Life* and *Map of Betrayal*, we can see the inter-connection between the diasporic subjects’ relation to geographical locations (China and America, in this case) and their emotional belonging. The main protagonists’ lovers serve as “threads” that tie members of Chinese diasporic subjects to their homeland. James Clifford describes the causal relationship between diaspora’s physical alienation and their imaginary return to a homeland as “living here and remembering/desiring another place.”75 My discussion of Ha Jin’s novels shows that diasporic subjects’ emotions play an important role in this relationship: their love for people and places in the homeland sustains their longing to return, yet the unreturned love and unfulfilled homecoming force them to return to their own soul and yield to solitude. In Ha Jin’s two immigrant novels discussed above, either creating a deterritorialized, decentered identity or inhabiting dual identities/consciousness, the characters display the existential angst of the Chinese diaspora. For them, nation and nationality are unreliable. Neither their diasporic route nor multiple identities give them a sense of belonging. In Nan’s case, the emotional sense of

74 Ibid., 274.
“home” does not depend on any nation they affiliate with, but exists in his self-sufficiency. In Gary’s case, his goal to be loyal to both nations, no matter whether it is genuine or fake, fails. In the end he is rejected by both countries; the next generation, Lilian and Ben, learn from his example and learns that the only reliable home is within individuals.

Following Kristeva’s and Ahmed’s argument that “nation is an effect of how bodies move towards it, as an object of love that is shared,”76 I argue that, diasporic subjects, while constantly en route between different nations and in a limbo between “towardness” and “away-fromness,” blur the boundaries and borders between nations. En Route identity celebrated by current diaspora discourse helps to identify the emotional movement and the flexible boundaries that Chinese immigrants like Gary inhabit. Their movement breaks down the promise of situatedness and locatedness, what “home” originally stands for. To speak for Ha Jin’s Chinese immigrant characters, diaspora is better understood as, in Lingchei Letty Chen’s words, “an existential condition, and an emotional and psychic disruption.”77 Such an existential condition constitutes and is constitutive of diasporic subjects’ home and identity.

4. Ha Jin’s Undefined and Undefinable Identity

Ha Jin’s two immigrant novels portray a hopeless picture of finding home in nations, but support nation-free individualism. Nan in A Free Life hopes to write “a kind of poetry that could speak directly to the readers’ hearts regardless of their cultural and ethnic backgrounds.”78 His

76 Sara Ahmed, Cultural Politics of Emotion, 133.
78 Ha Jin, A free Life, 473.
goal is to achieve a literature without boundaries and borders, and this is the home he imagines for himself at the end of the book: “You must go to a country without borders, where you can build your home.” It is only through literary creation that Nan finally finds his home. Caryl Phillips calls *A Free Life* “unashamedly autobiographical,” though Ha Jin denies the charge. Yet Ha Jin admits to identifying with Nan here and there, and we could indeed see the novel as speaking to Ha Jin’s personal journey to conjure up his diasporic identity and home.

Like Nan and Gary, Ha Jin does not necessarily inhabit one single identity, but simultaneously multiple identities. Haoming Gong points out the difficulty of the attempt to label Ha Jin as either a Chinese or an American writer. Yingjian Guo points out that the themes Ha Jin writes are mostly related to China; therefore most Mainland Chinese scholars don’t see him as Chinese American writer. Some others argue that Ha Jin shall be seen as American writer because of the language he writes in. The discrepancy between the themes he is writing about and the language in which he is writing makes it extremely difficult for us to categorize Ha Jin and his works. So first I will talk about Ha Jin’s cultural and literary identity, and explore

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79 Ibid., 660.
83 One example is that Sarah Johnson included Ha Jin into her *The Very Telling: Conversations with American Writers* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2006).
whether Ha Jin identifies with what his immigrant novel upholds—“home” in individual literary creations without reliance on national labels.

In his extensive reading of Ha Jin’s work, for instance, Lo Kwai-Cheung argues that Ha Jin’s situation challenges the traditional view of national literature. In the current global age, Lo argues, Chinese literature and literary studies go beyond where the works are produced, or whether they are written in the common language, in this case from China and in Chinese. Thus, he proposes reading Ha Jin’s works as modern Chinese literature.\footnote{See Lo Kwai-Cheung, “The Myth of ‘Chinese’ Literature: Ha Jin and the Globalization of ‘National’ Literary Writing,” Xiandai zhongwen wenxue xuebao 现代中文文学學報 6.2 (2005): 63–78.}

In advocating for such an interpretation, Lo Kwai-Cheung may be partially thinking of Ha Jin’s realistic portrayals of his homeland culture. On the cover of the Chinese translation of Ha Jin’s novel Waiting, the publisher advertises that the author “is one of the greatest realistic writers in the modern world.” Setting his early stories in China, from the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) to the beginning of Deng Xiaoping’s “Reform and Opening Up” policy (since 1978), Ha Jin creates realistic Chinese stories, setting them in the army (e.g., *Ocean of Words*) or in townships or cities during the Cultural Revolution (e.g., *Under the Red Flag*, *Bridegroom* and *Waiting*). *A Map of Betrayal* (2014) itself was inspired by a Chinese spy in the 1980s named Larry Wu-Tai Chin.\footnote{See Ha Jin, “Ha Jin on “A Map of Betrayal,” interview by Kevin Nance, Chicago Tribune, November 13, 2014, http://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/books/ct-prj-map-of-betrayal-ha-jin-20141113-story.html?page=1. For more about the Chinese spy in real life, see Tod Hoffman, The Spy Within: Larry Chin and China’s Penetration of the CIA (Hanover, NH: Steerforth Press, 2008), 42–67.} Evidence shows that Ha Jin often bases his narratives on facts. He has said that *Waiting* is based on a true story between a doctor and a nurse; his wife first relayed the tale to Ha Jin during their visit to her parents, who had once worked in an army hospital. And about
his early short stories, Ha Jin once claimed, “99% of the details are true.” By bringing her personal experience into his English works, he transports Chinese stories beyond national boundaries.

His poetry cannot be separated from his background either. Elements of Chinese culture can be found in the collections *Between Silences*, *Facing Shadows* and *Wreckage*, which expose the lives of oppressed people in Old China. His early writings thus embrace many Chinese cultural elements by narrating Chinese stories. This reflects Ha Jin’s imaginative transformation of his memories of China and his deep attachment to his homeland.

Moreover, in Ha Jin’s early works he incorporates quite a number of cultural-specific terms to narrate those “Chinese” stories, such as “lotus feet,” “black heart,” and “secure the law like a mountain.” It would not be difficult for readers familiar with Chinese to identify the original equivalents and render them back into Chinese, as *Waiting’s* translator Jin Liang successfully achieves. For example, Jin Liang translates “just a moment’s pleasure will ruin our lives for good” (p.68 in the original English edition) as “一失足成千古恨” (p.77 in Jin Liang’s Chinese edition), “a good man must never take liberties with his friend’s wife” (p.179 in English edition) as “朋友妻不可戲” (p.205 in Chinese edition), and “a fresh rose is planted on a cowpat” (p.186 in English edition), which means a beautiful lady marries an ugly man, as “一朵鮮花插在牛糞上” (p.214 in Chinese edition). In these cases, Ha Jin chooses to render his Chinese stories in English, but still uses Chinese idioms. This strategy not only helps him to

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capture an authentic Chinese culture in the stories, more important, it gives Western readers a sense of novelty and exoticism.\textsuperscript{88}

At times Ha Jin incorporates Chinese literary forms in his writing. He explains including the protagonist Wu Nan’s poetry journal at the end of \textit{A Free Life} follows the form of Chinese poets’ writing journals in the twelfth century, in which they “put down their thoughts and comments about writing from other poets, plus any material for poetry.”\textsuperscript{89} By having Nan’s poetry journal follow the narrative section (which ends with the word “home”), Ha Jin implies that the real return for Wu Nan is to be achieved through his literary creation. And this literary creation incorporates traditional Chinese elements. If the subtle Chinese elements play a crucial role in Nan’s returning home, so too do the Chinese elements in Ha Jin’s works. Although he abandoned plans to return after the 1989 Tian’anmen Incident, Ha Jin later hoped to return to China through literature, believing that “only through literature is a genuine return possible for the exiled writer.”\textsuperscript{90} This quotation suggests that, at one time, Ha Jin in fact hoped to return to his ancestral land through literature, temporarily sending missives back home from a distant shore.

Short of actually writing first in Chinese, Ha Jin has made extensive efforts to reach the Chinese audience. Most of his works have been translated and published in Taiwan. If not for the censorship placed on his novels, Ha Jin would have more of his writing published in Mainland China.\textsuperscript{91} Being bilingual and bicultural, Ha Jin follows the Chinese translations of his own work closely. For the Chinese translation of \textit{Waiting}, he provided considerable help and support by


\textsuperscript{89} Ha Jin, “Ha Jin, the Art of Fiction No.202.”

\textsuperscript{90} Ha Jin, \textit{The Writer as Migrant}, 21.

\textsuperscript{91} See note 5.
talking with his translator and reviewing the work. In particular, he encouraged the translator, Jin Liang, to use various strategies to portray the Chinese characters in the novel accurately, including employing a Northeastern dialect and using cultural-specific metaphors and idioms.92

Ha Jin also co-translated his debut collection of short stories, *Ocean of Words*, with his wife and translated his 2010 short story collection *A Good Fall*. These efforts suggest that he values the Chinese readership as much as the Western. Reaching that Chinese audience would be an important means of reclaiming his attachment to his homeland.

Yet his depictions of China and Chinese culture in early works like *Waiting* have also been portrayed as “self-Orientalism” by critics within China. Liu Yiqing of Beijing University argues that Ha Jin, in order to be successful, writes in a way that “curse[s] his own compatriots” as he “become[s] a tool used by the American media to vilify China.” 93 Instead of seeing Ha Jin’s description of China as realistic, Liu harshly criticizes it as emphasizing the country’s backwardness. She even castigates the U.S. edition of *Waiting* for propagating traditional Chinese stereotypes by featuring a single braid of hair running the vertical length of the cover. Interpreting Ha Jin’s text in this manner downplays his achievement as a writer, and casts him as an anti-China Orientalist.

Thus Ha Jin’s case problematizes the conventional taxonomy of “Chinese literature,” and

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92 From my e-mail exchanges with Ha Jin in 2010.

93 See Eric Eckholm, “After an Attack.” According to this report in the *New York Times*, the critic Liu Yiqing claims that Ha Jin’s depiction of an extremely rustic peasant wife with bound feet is an anachronism intended “to emphasize the backwardness of China.” The resistance of fellow villagers to Kong Ling’s request for a divorce, she says, is meant to show that the Chinese do not appreciate love. Liu says the book’s cover features a male pigtail, a symbol of the feudal era, and that all the critics and newspapers who propelled *Waiting* toward big prizes did so, not because of its supposedly elegant writing, but because it meets their goal of portraying the Chinese as ignorant and repressed.
seems to be in line with emerging discourses of Sinophone literature. Sinophone studies provide a framework to re-conceptualize Chinese literary modernity within the context of Asia and shift the focus from studying an East-West relationship to studying relationships within Sinophone communities. Ha Jin, as a Chinese speaker growing up in China, would belong to the Chinese community. Yet his works would be peripheral to the larger label of “Chinese literature” mainly because he writes in English. Moreover, his works include a dimension of political engagement, and at times resistance, that can often be found in Sinophone literature’s response to Chinese political and imperial hegemony. In fact, Ha Jin’s article “Exiled to English” is included in Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader (2013), edited by Shu-mei Shih et al. However, since Sinophone literature emphasizes the centrality of the Chinese language, Ha Jin’s English works do not rest comfortably with that label.  

Perhaps as an American citizen writing in English, Ha Jin is more precisely called a Chinese-American writer, especially according to the current inclusive definition of Chinese-American literature. In this regard, The Asian American Encyclopedia (1995) includes “all works by writers of Chinese descent who have decided to reside in America permanently.” Although the definition fits, Ha Jin remains one of the only few immigrant writers born in China who are regularly referred to as Chinese-American. While his early works were set mainly in China, beginning with 2007’s A Free Life Ha Jin decided to leave contemporary China in his writing and “negate the role of … spokesmanship.” Instead of continuing to attempt to speak for his

94 My previous discussion of this in my article “Home and Identity En Route in Chinese Diaspora” takes into consideration Ha Jin’s background as a Northeasterner, yet the peripheral state of Dongbei in China is not well established.


96 Ha Jin writes in his essay, “People often asked me, ‘Why burn your bridges’ or ‘Why mess with success?’ I would reply, ‘My heart is no longer there.’ In retrospect, I can see that my decision to leave contemporary China in my
country, Ha Jin sets that novel in America, relocating the subjects of his writing just as he
himself is relocated.

Although Ha Jin is often grouped with second or later generation Chinese-American
writers like Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston, there are key differences. For instance, their
understandings of “roots” are different. To Chinese-Americans of second and later generations,
Chinese roots are not based on concrete memories. Because their knowledge of China is second
or third-hand, ancestral roots for Chinese-Americans are an “imagined homeland”; as the
narrator of *The Woman Warrior* asks, “Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what
things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty,
insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is
Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?” Kingston’s semi-autobiographical
work draws out the confusion of Chinese-Americans regarding their own heritage, as they try to
distinguish authentic Chinese tradition from family idiosyncrasies and deliberately obfuscating
fictions. Lacking firsthand experience of their homeland culture, Chinese-Americans’
understanding of their roots is imaginary. The past they hanker for is not a past they have
experienced, but a learned or imagined one. They search for the real among family lore, repeated

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writing is a way to negate the role of the spokesmanship I used to envision for myself.” See Ha Jin, *The Writer as Migrant*, 28.

97 Earlier key anthologies in the field, like King-Kok Cheung’s *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature* (1997) and Xiao-huang Yin’s *Chinese American Literature since the 1850s* (2000), do not include Ha Jin. Yet, some later references identify him as a Chinese-American writer. For instance, Seiwoong Oh’s *Encyclopedia of Asian-American Literature* (2007) includes a long section on Ha Jin. In 2013, he was introduced as a guest speaker at the University of Delaware as one of “the foremost and most respected Chinese-American writers of fiction, poetry and essays.” See University of Delaware, “March 7, 8: Ha Jin,” *UDaily*, Feb. 26, 2013, http://www1.udel.edu/udaily/2013/feb/visiting-writers-ha-jin-022613.html.

98 This term is inspired by Salman Rushdie’s construction “imaginary homelands.”

tales, and visions of China as filtered through the Western lens of Hollywood. Ha Jin, in contrast, has a specific past as his desired object, although as closer analysis reveals, that desired object can indeed become as fictional and mythological as the homeland of second and third-generation writers.

Is Ha-Jin, then, a Chinese writer, having been born and raised in China? Is he a Chinese-American writer? Or is Ha Jin simply a non-hyphenated American writer, as he has often expressed the desire to be? After all, he is a writer who once said, in seeming rejection of his birth country, “I feel I have been betrayed by China, which has suppressed its people and made artistic freedom unavailable” (“Exiled”). If anything, Ha Jin and his works reveal the limitations of such questions. For instance, by reaching out to a Chinese audience, while presenting a fully realized portrayal of his homeland to English-speaking readers, Ha Jin destabilizes notions of Chinese and Chineseness—and of Chinese literature, illustrating that they are not monolithic concepts—but multiple, complex, and difficult to categorize. Among terms like refugee, exile, immigrant, and expatriate, Ha Jin chooses “migrant” to describe himself, in order to “be as inclusive as possible— it encompasses all kinds of people who move, or are forced to move, from one country to another, such as exiles, emigrants, immigrants, and refugees.” At a 2013 Yale Arts and Entertainment Festival, he expressed fondness for the term sojourner and its connotations of temporary residence. Diaspora would have been a better choice, for it


captures the inclusiveness of *migrant* and the implied motion of *sojourner*, while adding an additional sense of a relationship between home and identity fraught with dangers but full of possibility.

The Chinese diaspora could better explain Ha Jin’s artistic viewpoint. A diaspora’s sense of home is not left behind, but carried along with him in his new identity and, in this case, his works. Some key elements of a diaspora’s identity are constant movement and unease in settling. After the publication of *A Free Life* (2007) and *A Good Fall* (2009), both immigrant stories set in the West, Ha Jin returned to writing about China in *Nanjing Requiem* (2011), before moving towards Chinese diasporic life again in *A Map of Betrayal* (2014). His literary trajectory suggests the motion, but also instability of his identity, and the ambivalence of his relationship with both China and America. Torn between his old and new lands, Ha Jin appears, like many Chinese immigrants, to feel an identity crisis—straddling the two nations and being unable to settle down emotionally in his diasporic routes.

He insists that writing in another language other than his mother tongue is a betrayal. However, he only does that in order to avoid censorship and preserve the authenticity of his stories; this strategy shields him from committing an actual traitor. If what he does is to preserve the integrity of his content and hopes to render as complete information to readers as possible, this should not be counted as a betrayal.

Instead, China betrays him. China has closed the door to Ha Jin, banning his books and preventing him from going back to China. To the Chinese government, the themes he writes are “taboo subjects: the Korean War, the Cultural Revolution, the Tiananmen Square incident” and
he is “too outspoken”\textsuperscript{103} as he himself notes. The United States grants him freedom to speak about his stories and political issues in China. The strict control of the Chinese government and the “openness”\textsuperscript{104} he develops in the United States disqualify him to return to China.

Ha Jin realizes the real home for him is not located in any country or culture, but in his literary creation, just like Nan in \textit{A Free Life}. In fact Ha Jin has demonstrated a deep interest in the relationship between the individual and collective in his works. His first published poem called “The Dead Soldier’s Talk” appeared in \textit{Paris Review} in 1986, focusing on the theme of the individual’s self-abnegation for a collective cause. The two immigrant novels discussed above suggest that diasporic individuals should look for their “home” within themselves. And just like Ben in \textit{A Map of Betrayal}, Ha Jin feels “it’s safer to have loyalty to people, to individuals” because “a country can change; it can be very fickle and unreliable.”\textsuperscript{105} The title the “Map of Betrayal” is not so much about a map tracing geography and physical relationships, but this map is tracing emotional relationships, between Gary and the two countries and his two families. Therefore, again, it proves that the concept of “home” goes beyond geography and nationality, but more concretely generated from personal relationships and creations.

\textsuperscript{103} Ha Jin, “Ha Jin, the Art of Fiction No.202.”
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{105} Ha Jin, “Ha Jin on ‘A Map of Betrayal’.”
Coda

When the television series *Fresh off the Boat* first premiered on ABC in 2014, it won a large audience. Season one, for example, reached over seven million viewers in 2015.\(^1\) The reason is simple—it was the first time in over two decades that Asian American characters were the focus of a sitcom in the United States. The show was ABC’s second attempt to produce a sitcom featuring Asian Americans following the failure of *All-American Girl* featuring Korean-American comedian Margaret Cho in 1994. Instead of portraying stereotypical Asian characters as *All-American Girl* did, *Fresh off the Boat* aims to be a comedy in which audience can laugh at the culture shocks Eddie Huang’s Taiwanese family experience when they move from the Chinatown of DC to Orlando, Florida. Yet between the jokes what stays at the center of the conversations are cultural identity, cultural assimilation, the American dream, tensions between their home and adopted culture, all essential to what I have discussed throughout this dissertation.

On the other shore, Mainland China, along with the heat of Chinese students studying in the United States in the 1990s, the TV series focusing on Chinese immigrants’ life in America, *Beijingers in New York* (1993), set a record high in television ratings and won several prizes. Unlike many success stories of immigrants in America like the book *Harvard girl Liu Yiting: A Chronicle of Quality Education* published in 2000, this TV series shows the push and pull forces from both the homeland and adopted land that Beijingers experience in their time in America. Instead of drawing a romanticized picture of the American dream, *Beijingers in New York* 

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depicts the vicissitudes of their immigrant life, including marital relationships, emotional struggles, generational differences, economic hardships, cultural misunderstanding, similar to what we’ve seen in new immigrant stories like those of Ha Jin, Shi Yu, Chen Qian as discussed in this dissertation. These immigrant stories deconstruct the myths of the model minority and the American dream in Asian immigrant discourse.

These two TV series in America and China—*Fresh off the Boat* and *Beijingers in New York*—exemplify how the Chinese immigrant myth is constructed, de-constructed and re-constructed in film and fictional narratives. While written literature exposes readers to transnational and translingual practices of Chinese immigrant communities, the visual arts, cinema, television and new media portray another layer of Chinese immigrant politics, mixed with questions of censorship, adaptation, translation, etc. With this in mind, in the future I plan to extend the scope of my research to include movie and TV series that represent and question the notion of “home” in immigrants’ lives, in works such as Zhang Yimou’s *Coming Home*, Ang Lee’s *Wedding Banquet*, David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*, as well as *Fresh off the Boat*, and *Beijingers in New York*. Moreover, some of the works I studied in this dissertation were made into TV series or film, such as Yan Geling’s *A Woman’s Epic* and *The Criminal Lu Yanshi (Coming Home)*. I will looking at how the adaption affects the meanings of home as conveyed in the books. Meanwhile I will be comparing movie productions on Mainland China versus Taiwan and the U.S. (such as *Home Sweet Home*, *Wedding Banquet*, *Beijingers in New York*, etc.) to see how the notion of home translates in the movies.

More stressed in these mass media productions than the fictional narratives are the generational and romantic relationships. For instance, the movie adaption of Yan Geling’s *The Criminal Lu Yanshi, Coming Home* directed by Zhang Yimou, has compressed the historical and
political background of the book and centers on the draining, heartbroken love story between the old couple. Focusing on the romantic and familial relationships not only helps to avoid censorship but also attracts a popular audience.

Another question that puzzled me as I wrote this dissertation is, how do I label the writers and writings? Most directly, how do I categorize Mainland China literature vs. Chinese immigrant and Sinophone literature? Indeed, these are not very clear categories to begin with. As we look into the future of Sinophone studies, it may be that the already existing connections, communication and mutual influence between Chinese literature from Mainland China and overseas Chinese literature should be brought up, as the boundaries we tried to draw in the beginning were blurry to begin with. Meanwhile, with the emergence of new media and the internet, the boundaries of Chinese literature and Sinophone literature are further blurred. If we follow David Der-wei Wang and Jing-Tsu’s notion of Global Chinese literature that includes Chinese language literature produced both inside China and outside China, there must be universal themes, characteristics shared with other-language literatures in the global literature networks. Audience from other cultures may look at the Chinese immigrant literature discussed in this dissertation about the sense of home and sympathize with it because of their own experience, regardless of where they are from. While media and the internet raise questions of national identity, cultural interactions, and home, they also make these questions harder to define.

My work also raises this question: how does a focus on Chinese diasporic writers fit into the framework of postcolonial studies and globalization? Ha Jin, for instance, follows the example of migrant writers like Vladimir Nabokov and Joseph Conrad, yet in very different circumstances. All of them contribute to global English and global English literature with their
unique stories. Therefore, Chinese diasporic writers constitute an important part of the global network that makes up global literature and world literature. The notion of home discussed in this dissertation would evoke us to rethink cultural identities, nation, and boundaries in the age of globalization. The sense of home discussed in this dissertation is therefore connected to the idea of global nomadism, which describes a lifestyle detached from particular geographical locales and territorial belonging. Since home is defined in this dissertation as an emotional construct that gives people sense of belonging, there seems to be a strong correlation between emotions/affects and global nomadism. In the future I want to further explore this notion and how Chinese immigrants’ emotional struggles challenge or add to this notion.

The theme of home, eventually, is an ontological one. This project of home tells us that language is no longer merely an instrument, but the form of our existence. As Zuò zhuàn (左傳) mentions, writing is one of the three avenues to immortality, with the other two being meritorious acts and outstanding virtue.² When home becomes a notion that is detached from geographical locale or physical places, it can only rely on personal relationships, language, literature and the arts to define it. Language, not the actual country of dwelling, or historical mother land, might be the only reliable material through which to imagine home. Yet the fictional narrative of home is not a one-dimensional diagram, but a complicated one that takes the form of a multi-layered map.

Related to this multi-layered map, as I revise this work into manuscript, I will also engage with geocriticism. Both Sinophone and Diaspora studies are closely related to place and space, trying to define or re-define places. Sinophone studies, for instance, tries to debunk the

² Original is 左傳.蓑公二十四年: 三不朽: 立功、立德、立言. Li Xueqin, ed. Chunqiu zuozhuan zhengyi 春秋左傳正義 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999), 1003.
grand China discourse by drawing a historical and geographical line between Mainland China and non-Mainland Sinophone communities. Yet as my project shows these immigrant writers’ attempt to dis-locate or dis-label. This shows the limitation of geographical and spatial boundaries and portrays an imaginary map of identity that is built on vague boundaries rather than reality. Built on Robert Tally’s geocritical view that sees literary writing as a cartographic endeavor, and my findings in this project that the notion of home is comprised of multiple layers of meanings, I will further explore the notion of home through the lens of topography.

My dissertation has provided some personal comfort to my own sense of home, but only to a point. First, the dissertation traces the shift of diasporic Chinese’s experience of home from being national, collective in the 1960s–70s to being personal, individual in contemporary Chinese immigrant writings, but the texts chosen are limited. My future projects would look to strengthen the historical argument by looking beyond these representative works into other texts. In my future revisions, I hope to examine further the contexts in which these literary texts were produced. For instance, the overseas Chinese student writings were produced in the 1960s and 70s post-Cold War historical background when Communists and Capitalists were ostensibly at war. In comparison, the literary texts discussed in other chapters were produced in a post-socialist context when commercialization and cultural capital are the backbones of the literary market. Through further examination of this historical shift, the project can show how Chinese diasporic literature reflects the historical transformation of China’s relationship with the world as well as China’s process of globalization.

Second, although my project tries to bring together Sinophone and Anglophone Chinese American writings, the proportion is somewhat unbalanced as the majority of the dissertation covers Sinophone writers. This is largely because I situate the project in a Chinese literary and
Sinophone context. But I had hoped, though I may have fallen short, to make the project comparative, examining Chinese diasporic writers’ literary agenda, scheme and production in both the Chinese and American literary landscapes, examining how the images of Chinese immigrants and their cultural identities present themselves in both lands. To extend more comparisons between Chinese and English language works, I could study them as a form of cultural translation in the future.

Third, my dissertation starts out by pointing out the deficiencies of Sinophone and diaspora theories yet hasn’t identified an efficient resolution for those shortfalls. My project proves the limitation of Sinophone literature, which starts from the aim of decentralizing China and Chineseness, yet creates a segregation between Mainland China and non-Mainland Chinese communities, and differentiates Han from non-Han Chinese literature. By debunking China-centrism, Sinophone studies creates another center in the marginal area of Chinese literature—those works that are not produced on Mainland China. While Sinophone studies meaningfully evokes a lot of studies including mine, it may, as Shu-mei Shih maintains of diaspora studies, have an expiration date. Meanwhile, the concepts and debates in diaspora studies – roots and routes, sites, locales and so on have been useful to my project on Chinese diasporic literature, but the collective experience that diaspora studies have been focusing on has failed to explain fully the individual and personal feelings it is discussed in the dissertation. Literature tells more than what diaspora theories can render, and it’s more complicated than the dynamic of roots and routes and perhaps cannot be explained in a one-dimensional diagram. I am excited to see how geo-criticism and topography can provide another lens to my project.

Last but not least, the fields of both diaspora and Sinophone studies overstate identity politics, including mine. Inspired by C. T. Hsia’s concept “obsession with China,” I want to call
this phenomenon in diaspora and Sinophone studies an “obsession with identity.” Although studies on cultural identity have led to many productive discussions, the over-emphasis on cultural identity will not only create or intensify boundaries among people, but also possibly stimulate political or racial antagonism. Therefore, it can perhaps be the point of departure for us to re-think diasporic literature, and re-think the spiritual home of universal humanity through the various experiences of communities and individuals.
Epilogue

The Continuous Diasporic Home: How I came to this topic?

Where I grew up, my grandparents’ home, is situated in the earliest Chinese Overseas Village in Guangzhou, China. I heard that my grandpa was a returned overseas Chinese (Guiguo huaqiao 歸國華僑) from Vietnam although he did not often tell us about his time living there. In that neighborhood I talked to a number of returned overseas Chinese who shared with me their complicated feelings of home. One returned Vietnamese Chinese friend of my grandfather always left his gigantic house empty and allowed us to use it. I asked him why he often disappeared, returned suddenly, only to disappear again. He said, “whenever I am in Vietnam, I miss my motherland—China, so I came back and build a home; yet everything here seems so unfamiliar to me when I come back so I can’t help missing Vietnam again.” This feeling made him constantly travel between the two without ever settling down. It seems that to him home is not here or there, neither where he is from nor where he ended up. I was even then starting to ponder upon the question of home among these overseas Chinese. In some way, I must have thought that if I could figure out how they construct a home away from home, perhaps I could cure my own homelessness.

My interest in overseas Chinese further developed when I went to college. Upon entering the newly established School of Translation and Interpretation at Sun Yat-sen University on the Zhuhai campus, I learned that the reason our School was set up there was that it was the hometown of Yung Wing, “the father of liuxuesheng (overseas Chinese students)” who made an
early effort to encourage young Chinese to go to the United States to study Western science and engineering. He not only led the Chinese Educational Mission, but also inspired the earliest wave of Chinese students to the United States.¹ Then I decided to come to the States to pursue my doctoral degree, becoming part of the overseas Chinese community who are trying to define our identity and generate a sense of home.

Today I am still traveling on the diasporic journey in the States, and I could deeply feel my Sinophoning experience (I use an adjective form to signify this as an on-going process) — when I do not feel comfortable presenting academic paper in Chinese anymore, yet do not feel fully belong to the American soil; when I do miss my hometown food, yet slowly getting used to Americanized Chinese food… I am looking forward to seeing where my next diasporic/Sinophone journey takes me. On this endless journey, perhaps only the poem of the great Tang poet Bai Juyi (772–846) can point out a direction:

“Without having a home in my life to begin with,

I settle down where I find a peace of mind.”

(吾生本無鄉，心安是歸處).²

¹ The Qing government approved Yung Wing’s proposal to send 120 young Chinese students to the New England region of the United States to study science and engineering beginning in 1872. This proposal is known as Chinese Educational Mission and these early overseas Chinese students became the first group of Chinese students in the United States. For more detail about Yung Wing and his life, please see his memoir My Life in China and America published in 1909.

² See Bai Juyi, “Chu chucheng liubie” Parting friends outside of the city, in Bai Juyi ji 白居易集 vol.1 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1999), 149.


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