

VISIONS OF A HOMELAND IN TWO RECENT CHINESE AMERICAN SHORT STORY CYCLES: ANDREA LOUIE'S MOON CAKES AND WANG PING'S AMERICAN VISA

Rocío G. DAVIS
Universidad de Navarra

The powerful images and themes that have emerged with the rise of ethnic literatures have led to a necessary reworking of traditional manners of viewing the immigrant and minority situation in the United States. Entrance into what had long been considered the territory of the «Other» was made possible by the ever-expanding fiction of writers who have repeatedly meditated on the situation of the between-world artist and presented us with a search for personal and communal identity, through reflections on a homeland and the active responses to the immigrant's «new» world. The complicated process of selfhood and the inescapable doubleness of the between-world subject is the covert theme of much of this ethnic fiction, as the writers question what it is that determines both identity and community, signaling how geographical, ethnic, political and cultural makeup and differences serve as signifying aspects to this complex self. The recreation of this intricate self in fiction has, interestingly enough, brought about the development and expansion of a literary genre that has proven itself exceptionally suited to the task of articulating and elaborating distinctiveness. A survey of ethnic fiction in the United States demonstrates a proliferation of the short story cycle, a hybrid form that many of the principal ethnic writers have adapted and perfected as a tool through which they enact their dramas. This paper will explore the short story cycle as a vehicle for the development of Chinese American fiction in particular, and will analyze the cycles of two Chinese American writers in the United States today, Andrea Louie's *Moon Cakes* (1995) and Wang Ping's *American Visa* (1994), to show

how the drama of the relationship with a homeland executed by these writers finds its fulfillment through a genre that is particularly fitting to the themes they embody.

To tap the resources of memory and turn to a homeland for the sources of cultural roots and identity, are among the most reliable approaches to the questions these Chinese American writers must deal with. In this regard, Salman Rushdie's 1982 essay «Imaginary Homelands,» may be considered a paradigm of the discourse of writers in the between-world condition. Here, Rushdie describes and defines the situation of those writers who are, in the words of Michael Ondaatje's English patient: «Fighting to get back to or get away from our homelands all our lives» (1992, 176). More specifically, Rushdie analyzes the theme and presentation of the homeland in the works of this type of writer, pointing out that the attempt to portray one's land of ethnic origin from temporal and spatial distance is inevitably coupled with the inability to be faithful to objective reality. Although he speaks principally about Indian writers, his observation of the situation clearly applies to most writers who share the multicultural experience.

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge—which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind. (1992, 10)

Recognizing that the distances of time and space distort facts, Rushdie has stated that remembered experiences need not be validated by objective realities. Consequently, the narratives that arise are «imaginatively true» and that the result would be «a novel of memory and about memory, so that my India was just that: 'my' India, a version and no more than just one of all the hundreds of millions of possible versions» (1992, 10). Any writer who writes about his homeland from the outside, he claims, must necessarily «deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost» (1992, 11). Nonetheless, it is precisely the fragmentary nature of these memories, the incomplete truths they contain, the partial explanations they offer, that make them particularly evocative for the «transplanted» writer. For Rushdie, these «shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were *remains*; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities» (1992, 12).

The attempt to build narratives about the homeland on the basis of personal or collective memory has proven to be an attractive prospect for many exiled or immigrant writers, who may even feel that this is the only way to reconcile oneself to both one's past and present. In relation to this, it may be noted that narratives of memory proliferate in ethnic American literature in general. This observation may correspond to a conscious

or even subconscious desire to establish or preserve connections with the past, with one's cultural roots, in order to allow one to act freely on the present. As the editors of *Memory, Narrative, and Identity* have explained: «Memory . . . shapes narrative forms and strategies toward reclaiming a suppressed past and helps the process of re-visioning that is essential to gaining control over one's life and future. The ethnic narrative thus becomes, in Stuart Halls' phrase, 'an act of cultural recovery,' and the emergent ethnicity embedded therein develops a new relationship with the past, which is to be recovered through both memory and narrative»(1994, 19). This, perhaps, to support Rushdie's claim that somehow, inescapably, «it's my present that is foreign, and that the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time» (1992, 9).

The dynamics of the short story cycle make it a particularly appropriate form for those narratives of memory that articulate this imaginative quest for a homeland. This hybrid literary genre may be defined as « . . . a set of stories linked to each other in such a way as to maintain a balance between the individuality of each of the stories and the necessities of the larger unit . . . (so) that the reader's successive experience in various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts» (Ingram 1971, 15, 19). The experimental quality of this form is a fundamental constituent of the new definition of cultural pluralism that incorporates the immigrant legacies of Asian Americans, while adapting to the practices of the culture in which these works are created. The term «short story cycle» implies, above all, a principle of organization, a structural scheme for the working out of an idea, characters, or themes, even a circular disposition in which the constituent narratives are simultaneously independent and interdependent. The pivotal challenge of each cycle is twofold: the collection must, at one and the same time, assert the individuality and independence of each of the component parts while creating a necessary interdependence that emphasizes the wholeness and essential unity of the work. Ingram has further pointed out that consistency of theme and an evolution from one story to the next are among the classic requirements of the form, with recurrence and development as the integrated movements that effect final cohesion (1971, 20). Short story cycles magnify the relationships between the separate stories to create a larger whole, without destroying the specificities of each individual story.

As a genre, the cycle looks back to Western oral traditions of narrative while embodying signs of modernity: they may be said to emulate the act of storytelling, the effort of a speaker to establish solidarity with an implied audience by recounting a series of tales linked by their content or by the conditions in which they are related. Interestingly, Chinese American literature has revealed a tradition similar to this Western phenomenon, the long folk tradition of song and story conventionally called «talk-story» (*gong gu tsai*) in immigrant circles, brought to popular attention by Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. This tradition, dating from the Sung dynasty storytellers in China and continually revitalized by Chinese arrivals in America, has been defined as «a conservative, communal folk art by and for the common people,

performed in the various dialects of diverse ethnic enclaves and never intended for the ears of non-Chinese . . . it served to redefine an embattled immigrant culture by providing its members immediate, ceremonial access to ancient lore (and) retained the structures of Chinese oral wisdom (parables, proverbs, formulaic description, heroic biography, casuistical dialogue) long after other old-country traditions had died» (Sledge 1990, 143). The fact that the original stories in both Western and Eastern traditions arose from folk imagination, from the collective effort of many people, gave each a separate identity, a uniqueness, and an independence which then was subsumed and integrated into a whole, by a single author who modified and retold the stories as he fitted them into his own design. Although it is obvious that the existence of short story cycles is a global phenomenon, still the pragmatic affinity for short stories that shaped the literature of the United States decisively in the nineteenth century seems to persist in the form of a national inclination in the present century for organized short story collections: perhaps the very determination to build a unified republic out of diverse states, regions, and population groups, helps to account for this continuing passion for cycles (Kennedy 1995, viii). As such, the short story cycle may be viewed as a formal manifestation of the pluralistic culture in which it is created and nourished.

The fundamental structure of a cycle emerges from the interaction of the diverse elements in the relatively independent components. At the same time, connective patterns on all levels draw these together into a totality strengthened by varying types of internal cohesion. In the first place, the title of a volume may indicate an organizing concept that acquires depth and resonance as the collection unfolds: titles that point to a particular locale or to a unifying element give immediate focus and direction to the process being unveiled. The principal approaches to the necessary cohesion may involve, for instance, the process of development of a character; a dominant, explicit theme, such as a generation gap or search for identity, the delineation of a particular locale or community, or the quest for a homeland. Since short story cycles do not usually require the type of ending expected of a traditional novel, its typical concluding section or sections tend to simply round off the themes, symbolism, and whatever patterned action the cycle possesses. In this manner, through the drawing together in a final stories or series of stories the themes and motifs, symbols, or the characters and their communities which have been developing throughout, the author places the finishing touches on the portrait being created.

Nonetheless, as Ingram has emphasized, the most pervasive unifying pattern of short story cycles appears to be the dynamic pattern of recurrent development (17). This affects all the elements of the narrative: the themes, *leitmotifs*, settings, characters, and structures of the individual stories and, in consequence, the entire context of the collection as a unit. The repetition of a theme from different angles, for instance, and its ensuing growth in depth in the mind of the reader, may unify a cycle at the same time that it individualizes each story. The image of the Moon Cakes in Andrea Louie's cycle emphasizes her severed relationship with her father and her efforts to establish a

connection between herself and the land her family and her lover come from. In much the same way, Wang Ping's *American Visa* outlines the various stages of her journey to the United States, with constant references to the starting point of this trip: her life in China.

The specificities of the form therefore work to make the short story cycle an especially pertinent vehicle for the distinctive characteristics of ethnic fiction in general. The short story cycle itself is a hybrid, occupying an odd, indeterminate place within the field of narrative, resembling the novel in its totality, yet composed of distinct stories. Such a fusion of modes «imposes new strategies of reading in which the movement from one story to the next necessitates reorientation, just as the uneasy reciprocity between part and whole conditions the ongoing determination of meaning» (Kennedy 1988, 14). Ethnic fiction has also obliged towards new strategies of reading and has caused a new awareness through a revisioning of the between-world circumstance. The short story cycle, which hovers between the novel and the short story, is thus a particularly apt medium with which to enact the enigma of ethnicity, the feeling, in Rushdie's words, that one falls «between two stools» (1992, 21). The ethnic short story cycle may be considered the formal materialization of the trope of doubleness as the between-world condition is presented via a form that itself vacillates between two genres. The fact that short story cycles exist in all the different ethnic literatures also signals the appropriateness of the form to portray a common experience. Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*, Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*, and Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* are only a small sampling of the number and variety of ethnic short story cycles to be found. Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* may be considered the most emblematic Chinese American short story cycles: they attempt to synthesize Asian heritage with American aspirations presenting portraits of mother-daughter relationships that have to endure and bridge not only a generation gap but that created by the waning influence of an older culture and the overwhelming presence of another. The cycles to be analyzed in this paper, in some way, look to Kingston's and Tan's narratives and stem from their experimentation with the form.

Patricia Lin Blinde, speaking of Maxine Hong Kingston, has pointed out how the situation of the individual who must achieve the integration of heritage with the socio-cultural traditions of the adopted land finds its formal representation in the use of hybrid literary genres. As the barbarian melodies «translated well» when played on Chinese instruments, Kingston's work, and in particular her development of a very distinct mode, is the result of her incorporation of elements unique to her «exiled» experience as a Chinese American woman with the literary forms available to her (1979, 52). This is perhaps the wellspring of the need to appropriate a hybrid form, as the blending of genres may also reveal unique sensibilities to outside realities. Experimenting with genre combinations and discovering the utility of these is an intrinsic part of the writer's task, more so when the experience to be embodied is characterized by its

continual crossing of boundaries. As such, to choose to write a short story cycle is emblematic of the creative position these ethnic writers choose, one that is almost an optical illusion, being two things at the same time, and creating something totally new: a metaphor for their task of negotiating identity. In this regard, Elizabeth Ordoñez has pointed out that the «disruption of genre» is a common thread that links various ethnic texts: «the text itself becomes both the means and embodiment of modifying and reshaping female history, myths, and ultimately personal and collective identity» (1982, 19).

Moreover, the ethnic short story cycle, as a hybrid within a hybrid, ultimately offers diverse levels of reading and understanding, and may help further the ethnographic purposes of the writers. On the one hand, there is the patterned closure of the individual stories which principally enact personal dramas of identity and, on the other, the discovery of larger unifying strategies that transcends the gaps between the stories and serve to construct a larger sphere of action through imaginative recollections that serve to revision a homeland. Asian American writers, who may be conscious of a double literary inheritance or, at least, the reality of an insider/outsider point of view, tend to contemplate how binary categories of cultural classification have worked in the production of knowledge and counter-knowledge within the framework of literary and cultural studies, a position from where they redefine and construct alternative identities and communities. Hybridity, an important characteristic of all ethnic literary texts, can therefore be considered a strength rather than a weakness. It does not imply a denial of the traditions from which it springs, but rather focuses on a continual and mutual development. In this manner, the text itself becomes both the means and embodiment of the histories, the mechanism for modifying and recreating personal and collective identity.

On different levels, ethnic short story cycles may project a desire to come to terms with a past that is both personal and collective: this type of fiction will explore the ethnic character and history of a community as a reflection of a personal odyssey of displacement, and search for self and community. The between-world writer's situation is the intense reworking of questions that ultimately refer to issues as oppositionality, marginality, boundaries, displacement, and authenticity: a process rather than a structure, requiring constant variation and review. This process is not different from that involved in the appreciation of a story cycle, in which the evolution and gradual unfolding of the themes, a discovery of a new kind of unity in disunity, integrate the essence of the form. Furthermore, insisting on a unitary identity can be a means of opposing and defending oneself from marginalization. Although there is no limit to the kinds of subjects or themes that are found in cycles, one repeatedly discovers that twentieth-century cycles are preoccupied with certain themes, including isolation, disintegration, indeterminacy, the role of the artist, and the maturation process (Mann 1989, 13-14). As Elaine H. Kim asserts,

the most recurrent theme in our writing is what I call claiming America for Asian Americans. That does not mean disappearing like raindrops in the ocean of white

America, fighting to become «normal,» losing ourselves in the process. It means inventing a new identity, defining ourselves according to the truth instead of a racial fantasy, so that we can be reconciled with one another in order to celebrate our marginality. It is this seeming paradox, the Asian American claim on America, that is the oppositional quality of our discourse. (1987, 88)

As such, she appears to suggest that the need for a revalidation of the classic literary genres may be part of this «claim.» Notably, the most emblematic Asian American works have challenged generic constraints, a phenomenon that Patricia Lin Blinde attributes to «the richness of bi-cultural life experience (which) cannot be contained within the limits of literary dictates» (1979, 53). The process of establishing Asian American identities from within, independently of imposed definitions, has reached a turning point clearly resonant with the phenomenological reality of the new Asian American. The experimentation with genre as a strategy of authorship manifests how these writers have «moved beyond the conventional dichotomous, binary construction of white and Asian-national to a positioning of ethnic identity as interrogative, shifting, unstable, and heuristic» (Lim 1993, 160). The two story cycles to be analyzed in this paper fulfill the potential of the cycle form as a vehicle for the expression of the particular sensibility and experience of the Chinese American subject in diverse ways. These works may also be considered expressions of a new confidence demonstrated in a freer use of language and genres that stems from the Asian American's increased appreciation of cultural pluralism in American society and the awareness that they have a place in the canons. Furthermore, the problems of race and adapting to the mainstream American life, as well as the consciousness of marginality, the between-world position, and the inescapable desire to belong are recurrent themes in both narratives. More specifically, the narrators of the cycles address the enigma of their ethnicity through reflections on China and their relationship with that land and its people. One of the principal aspects of each of the cycles is the dilemma of the main character's relationship to China, represented in diverse ways. Somehow, each of the protagonist-narrators is obliged to deal with this question and resolve the problem of the role their cultural heritage plays—or should play—in their lives. All the points of view are US-based, but China, as country, as mother, as home, or as undeniable influence, looms large in the background. The collections are thus exercises in definition of the relationship between China and the United States as embodied in the lives and perspectives of the different characters. Their results constitute an essential part of the development of the theme.

Andrea Louie's *Moon Cakes* is a collection of tales that arise from the protagonist-narrator's reflections while on a tour of China. Interspersed with stories of Maya's journey, of what she sees and experiences, are stories of her childhood, her family, and of the men who most influenced her: her Chinese father, her first love and her Chinese boyfriend. She opens the narrative by saying she will tell a «love story . . . but not the kind you think . . . (It) has no beginning, no end. So I simply must start somewhere in

the middle, which is now» (5-6). This introduction immediately sets the tone for the stories to follow: nostalgia and a sentimental looking back coupled with a search for a point of reference. The dramatic setting of the opening scene, Maya looking out to the sea from a mountain in China, serves as the frame for the rest of the stories as it sets off the chain of her recollections and her analysis of the diverse circumstances that brought her to this spot. «I stand at the edge of China, which is like being at the end of the Earth. I want to step off the edge. I want to step out into the water, knowing that it will not really support the weight of a woman but instead will envelope me, hold me like the warm, safe embrace of a mother holding her daughter within the inner sea of her body»(7). In this manner, China is set at the center of her collection in a very particular way: the stories, though mostly flashbacks, arise from her experience of China, from her growing awareness of finally being in the country that had subconsciously molded her life. The journey Maya will undertake is twofold: the voyage away from her familiar surroundings into the mystery that is China sets in motion another journey - into the past, into the uncharted waters of her emotions and the memories she had tried so hard to suppress.

This arrival in China awakens in Maya conflicting feelings of belonging, and of self-awareness. «Perhaps I really am in the land of dreams: China is so earthy, so close to the ground that I cannot believe it to be real . . . I have been in China for barely six weeks, but already I have no concept of America, of what my life was like there. I have no sense of reality, of what is truth or fiction, present or past» (9). The struggle for a definition of a homeland, ultimately for the roots and the meaning of belonging, is a theme that links the stories Maya tells. Central to this is her growing consciousness of the between-world situation. Never having doubted her American identity before, she must now face the possibility of a bond with a heritage she had not been aware of or had not wished to recognize before.

This journey is preceded by the story of a symbolic dream of «a child of conviction» (11) –herself– going out on a futile adventure to find moon cakes in her Midwestern neighborhood. The image of moon cakes is a clear reference to her father, and her pain at having lost him before being allowed to develop a meaningful relationship with him. This image is, more importantly, a specific reference to a tradition the family observed: «Every year during the Mid-Autumn Festival my father would insist that we all sit down and eat a single moon cake together. That was one old Chinese custom that was very important to him, and the Chinese are big on food metaphors. The moon cake symbolized wholeness and roundness and completeness. The family. China. The universe» (137). The year Maya was eleven, her father died two weeks after the mid-Autumn Festival. This early loss would later awaken in Maya the need to know China, as a manner of knowing her father. It will also make her aware of the importance of a past for herself, as a touchstone for identity and belonging. The memories she harbors of her father, of the little time she shared with him, are a cornerstone to the construction of her own identity, an identity she will try to build with tools she recognizes are unreliable. «I learned early on that memories could be a tricky thing. It began with my

father, who had no past, no childhood. Or at least one that he cared to share» (115). In the story that centers on her father, Maya will explore the relationship she had with him and the possibilities that might have been. Unasked and unanswered questions about his past will haunt her. «I do not know if his youth in China was filled with pain or hunger or blitzed with wartime fears . . . I don't know which filled his youth more, happiness or horror; he simply would not say . . . It was as if my father had deliberately misplaced his past when he was fourteen, as if he had left his boyhood on some San Francisco side street and never gone back to get it» (116). Her father's apparent willingness or need to forget the Chinese part of his life will only inspire Maya to want to know more. Ultimately, she will come to resent his holding back the shards of heritage she might have inherited from him. Her journey to China will then take on the aspect of filling in the gaps.

The story of her father and the recollection of the family tradition he fostered emphasizes her special relationship with him and, conversely, the distance that separates her from her mother and sister. Relationships, mostly failed ones, recur in the cycle, as Maya seeks to identify herself with the people around her. Many of the characters Maya reflects on are eponymous heroes or heroines in her diverse stories. Her love for her father, turned early on to bitter grief, will make her seek out other men against whom to measure herself and from whom she can gain a sense of security. This may be because her relationships with women only seem to hinder her process of self-identification. The stories that deal with the men in her life have love in diverse forms as their central theme, and her search for herself through that love. «Father,» «Lance,» and «Alex» describe her developing relationships with the men who, in a way, mold her and against whom she measures herself. «Men run through my life like a kind of undertow, both gentle and insistent, occasionally unsafe, but always there . . . it is by men that I keep time; they are the ones who punctuate, who give rhythmic and forward movement to my years. Perhaps it is because they have caused more of a disturbance, have left more chaos in their wake. No woman, not even my mother, has caused me as much pain or joy as a man. There is no happy medium in their presence» (239). Ultimately it is the memory of these men, particularly that of her father and of Alex that will take her to China, in an attempt to recover them by knowing their homelands.

Maya's failed relationships seem to be those with the women who play the most important roles in her life. The stories entitled «Childhood» and «Womanhood» reiterate the theme of the frustration she feels in her dealings with these: «there is my mother, who has the tautness and precision of an iron wire, and my sister, who is something of an alter ego - the prettier, smarter, more vampish self I never was . . .» (239). The narrator can neither confide in nor understand her cold mother. «My mother is an amazing woman, and I regard her with equal measures of reverence, fear, and resentment. Early on, I learned it was wise neither to cross my mother nor to expect too much from her» (19). Her sister Maura was, for most of her childhood, Maya's principal point of reference. «I was perfectly happy being the younger sister; in my eyes it was the perfect position.

Nothing was expected of me but to be secondary, a corollary. She had a way of making me think that her praise was mine as well. Only later, when my sister began slipping from my life, did I find childhood awkward and unbearable. When she was not there to define the limits of my personality, I found myself without one. So that even now she is cool, serene, and even, and I am a jumbled mass of insecurities» (29). But these dealings cannot fill her emptiness, and the stories that outline these relationships are characterized by a sense of insecurity, particularly when set against those that describe her relationship with men.

Consequently, Maya's need for a journey of discovery to China is born of complex emotions, of an awareness of the compulsion to know herself and the men she had loved. It is also born of years of consciousness of a difference between her and the others around her, a difference she had not really been able to pinpoint accurately. Her Chinese heritage was something there, manifested in minute household details, but never thoroughly discussed nor understood. The first two stories in the collection deal with her growing awareness of her displacement, a fact that will become evident to her with the passage of time. «I am a Chinese daughter born in the unlikely American landscape of farmer's sons (22) . . . Although I knew our family was Chinese, I did not know where China was. We lived in Ohio, and if we got in the car and drove for a while, we could see farms and cows that were black and white and sometimes brown. I knew milk shakes were made from cows, and intuitively I knew that milk shakes were not a very Chinese thing» (36-37). Her slow realization of her family's difference contrasts sharply with her childhood setting. « . . . I noticed that we had a slightly different past. We did not have ancestors who had fled potato famines or religious persecution. And even though my sister and I went to the same school as everybody else and lived in a house that pretty much looked like other people's houses, I began to realize that we were . . . different» (40). The difference will become more marked with time, and Maya will always be acutely conscious of the separation both between herself and other Americans, and, later on, between herself and other Chinese. Her spontaneous love for the land of her birth, coupled with an awareness of her racial alienation to it, will lead to her diaspora. «I am not by nature a wanderer, but I feel that I have become one, cast out from the landscape I cannot possess. Actually, I haven't even traveled very much, but my spirit drifts» (22). Her growing awareness of the importance of a landscape with which to identify is clearly an integral part of her imaginative need for a homeland and her compulsion to seek or create it.

After her father's death, her estrangement from her mother and sister will increase with time, and her early years in college are attempts to define herself, through clothes, friends and the accidental discovery of a major. When she begins to take Chinese Art, she discovers the land of her father and, at that moment, the world of China opened up to her in a manner she would never have imagined: «I became enchanted with a world on paper that was incredibly lovely – the landscape of a place I never had seen, the renderings of birds and flowers that were too exquisite to be real. I would look into

those images and be taken away into mystical forests and down rivers of dreams; I had clear passage into mountain pavilions and imperial courtyards. In this world of brush and ink, everything was so neat, so complete. There were no loose ends to be tidied up, no crises to be solved by me personally» (60). In this manner, China is slowly converted into a dreamland of possibilities that beckons. Her unexpected bonding with the landscape of her ancestors captivates her imagination and pushes her towards a more profound communion with the land she is beginning to recognize as that which will restore to her something she has unwittingly lost, or perhaps has never had.

On a more practical scale, Maya's reason for traveling to China is to try and recuperate a lost love, Alex. «I think I decided to go to China out of desperation. I have found it amazing that a broken heart can drive one to a rashness I never dreamed possible . . . (74).» But she is aware that her sojourn in China will not leave her indifferent and, even on the plane, she has reason to begin to question both sides of her heritage. An elderly Chinese lady she meets there begins to talk precisely about the problem she was wrestling with: «We so sorry when children try to forget to be Chinese. But maybe we foolish, no, we old women? 'American' means new thing, new person, more braver, ready to take over world. Children tell me they, wah, 'straddle fence' between Chinese side and American side. Hard on their bottoms to sit there all time, easy slide off, fall down, lose face, break your heart» (84). Maya's idealism about America also comes to be questioned in this conversation: «Who say there is no sorrow on Golden Mountain? In China big river called Sorrow of China because flood in bad year. But you have warning, right? Here, you have no warning, no nothing. And there plenty of sorrow here. Sorrow like river, flowing down street» (85). The conflicting points of view highlighted in this section also find their formal reflection in the alternating of the stories Louie presents: visions of a Chinese present that lead to memories of America. The ironic twist is that the author presents the creation of Maya's «imaginary homeland»—China—while the protagonist is literally experiencing the land. The recollections in the cycle are the stories of her life in America.

Maya's attitude, as she travels across the wide and diverse Chinese countryside, is one of a blind expectation. She had gone with desperation and uncertain hope, of something undefined. As the days of the trip pass, she becomes more and more uneasy, as she does not seem to know what is happening. «Ever since we arrived here I've been waiting for something to happen. People say you're supposed to feel more Chinese when going to China, but I do not. But what did I expect? Did I think that one day I would wake up, look into a mirror, and see another me?» (102). She reviews the questions of home she had asked herself during her relationship with Alex. When she became aware that he would irrevocably leave her to return to Hongkong, she contemplated going with him, a thought she quickly rejected: «. . . there was no way I could go. I did not want to go someplace where I looked like everyone else but felt like an alien. I felt no affinity for China, no longing for that particular landmass on the other side of the Earth. But America, this land that had once been a frontier of dreams, was different:

This was home, and I felt it in my bones. I could not even begin to think of leaving it» (282). Inexplicably, the more time she spends in China and the more of the country that she sees, the greater her affinity with it becomes. America seems to fade more and more into the background, to mean less to her as the significance of China, as personal heritage and that of the men she loved, acquires vivacity and reality.

In the end, she discovers the ultimate purpose of her mysterious journey. Underneath her excuses about wanting to learn more about art, she realizes that she had come to look for and to «know» both Alex and her father, to fill in the gaps of the fragments she had of them.

I am looking for traces of the world that formed him, that built his spirit. I am looking for all the threads of a story that began thousands of years ago in lost dynasties and that now lead up to him. I am trying to figure out what it was in his Chinese heart that lured him away from me . . . I am looking for what it means to be Chinese, because it was Alex's Chinese loyalty that brought him back to this side of the Earth. I am looking for that pull of home, that strange call he heeded . . . And now I realize it is the same call my father listened for night after night, hidden within the plaintive cries of his Cantonese opera tapes. But for my father it was a sound that brought him home in mind only. It was a home that he had left willingly and that most likely had been cruel (293-295-296).

The last story of the collection, that brings Maya to this realization, is a kind of epiphany for her, a coming to terms with a country that brought her the people she most loved and had lost: « . . . this place is where it all began: This is where the men I loved most were conceived, both in flesh and spirit. And for that alone I always will be respectful» (300). Here she will discover the subtle threads that have bound her to a country she had not seen until now, and to a heritage that she had unknowingly nurtured through the memories of her father and the longing for Alex. In this manner, she will understand her father's choice to be silent about his past as she looks around and contemplates the present Chinese reality. «I used to think my father had no past, but now I see that that is not so. It still is here, all of it. There may not be that awful famine anymore; there may not be death at every turn. But the memory of it remains, and that is enough» (317). The memories she had desperately sought are now given palpable shape in the vision of China she contemplates physically and bonds with emotionally.

More importantly, Maya discovers in herself the possibility to overcome the losses she had not come to terms with. In uncovering a Chinese heritage for herself and understanding the men she had loved, she will achieve a maturity and serenity she did know she was seeking. «To be Chinese, I am beginning to think, is to accept the difficulty of being human. There is happiness, of course, and joy and good fortune. And working hard is a good thing. But there is also bitterness and deep sorrow, and to be Chinese means to swallow them whole, because that is the way of the living; it is part of the deal

for staying on this side of death» (315). The fragmentary nature of the narrative, the episodic revelation of the influences on Maya's life, acquire a wholeness in the end, in the protagonist's acceptance of the heritage she sought. In identifying herself with the people she sees in China, Maya recognizes her unbreakable bond with the land and the people she had not known existed. «Earlier a woman had walked by on the street. «Look!» Mrs. Barclay pointed out. «She looks just like you.» I turned. And so did she. Our eyes met for that infinite second, and in that glance we saw ourselves. We were sisters, cousins; we were one and the same» (330).

Wang Ping's *American Visa* presents the opposite point of view from Andrea Louie's cycle in that the narrator, Seaweed, was born and raised in China. Eight of the eleven stories in the collection are set in China and the others, though recounted from America, center mostly on memories of people or events set in the homeland. Recurrent themes run through these varied tales: her need to belong caused by a sense of rejection from her family, her consciousness of beauty – noted in her detailed physical descriptions and her obsession with what she considers her ugliness, her maturation process, and her desire to find a better life for herself in America because of what she perceives as a futility of life in China. The point of view is largely objective, and Seaweed narrates impassively even the events that most profoundly affect her life. There is clearly an emotional contrast to be noted: the stories set in China tend to be more sentimental and center with her own childhood traumas, discoveries, and personal upheavals; those set in America refer more often to characters in her extended family and are told from a distance, in space and feeling.

Her volatile relationship with her family is a cause of loneliness for her, and many of the stories are variations on the theme of separation from the family unit. She experiences what she perceives as her mother's rejection keenly, and her principal memories of her childhood are of solitude, «How many times at dusk, when everything changed colors, had I hidden in a corner or behind a door or a tree, weeping, imagining my own death, and feeling homesick at home?» (28). With a sense of alienation from a family linked by misunderstanding, Seaweed nurtures the need to belong. She tries to join the Youth League, «not because it was a great honor, a step towards joining the Communist Party . . . but because I needed to belong to something, to be recognized somewhere» (22-23). Her attempts to find a niche for herself in the diverse areas open to her separate her more from the family structure. What she remembers as her family's harsh treatment of her, coupled with her own sense of inadequacy, make her long for other horizons: «Rather die than live a life like this, I told myself. Time to leave. It didn't matter where, as long as I got out of this apartment, this factory, and this island. There was nothing to hold me here anymore» (23).

The stories serve to delineate Seaweed's forceful character. Her determination makes her dream beyond the realities she witnesses around her: «I would rather kill myself than live a life like my parents: working, eating, sleeping, gossiping, quarreling for money, and growing old. No! My life would be different. It would be full of meaning

and beauty. I would have the best education, best work, best love, best family. My children would never ever weep behind a door or a tree!» (28). These ambitions, which contrast dramatically with the attitudes of all those around her, are what will lead her to first leave her family, move to a poor village and become a peasant. The idealism she originally associates with rural life quickly vanishes as she witnesses the true tragedies of poverty and ignorance. «The Story of Ju,» filled with pathos, sets her dreams beside the reality of life and the fatalistic world-view of those who refuse to dream. She cannot comprehend her friend Fenli, who rationalizes Ju's suicide in this manner: «We should all know our positions in this world and be content with them. Otherwise we'll end up in misery. All the peasants agreed that Ju should never have gone to school. The books had made her think too much. They blinded her eyes and turned her into a fool. You know what book she had tied around her waist when she hung herself? *Andersen's Fairy Tales!* What did she want - to be a mermaid?» (38-39). At Ju's grave, Seaweed, who has nurtured the child's dreams, could only weep: «I sobbed for Ju, whose life had ended even before it began, and for Hua, whose life was nothing but misery and waste, and for myself, who had grown old —very, very old— at the age of eighteen, in order to live» (64).

The narrative is episodic: the stories are presented neither in chronological order nor is there any clearly defined structure. They are uneven in length and in intensity, ranging from short sketches like «Lipstick,» the recounting of Seaweed's reflections upon accidentally discovering a forgotten lipstick at the corner of the dining table, and «Lotus,» another vignette in which she recalls a conversation she had had with her grandmother about the custom of footbinding, to more fully developed stories like «Revenge» or «The Story of Ju.» What these do reveal in conjunction is the growing consciousness of the narrator to the realities of the world around her and to herself in relation to that world. Later, when the world changes, and she is forced to adapt to dreams deferred, the stories begin to acquire a tinge of nostalgia. But the narrative purpose of the fractured recollections is clear: each story poses a question that Seaweed must answer, and each answer is a step forward in maturity and independence.

The diverse stories present us with a view of China during and after the Cultural Revolution, of the protagonist's pragmatic way of coping with the system and her perception of the paradoxes inherent in it. Visions of America, and of the West in general, abound as something to be desired and sought for. «She (Sea Cloud, the protagonist's younger sister) looked like a foreigner, people also said, with admiration in their voices. I couldn't understand why Western books and ideas were poisonous but to look foreign was desirable» (2). Faced with these critical contradictions, and forced by her ambitions to do more, Seaweed is led to America. «Three months ago, I left behind everything I had in Shanghai —my lover, my job at Fudan University, my apartment and the books I had accumulated for ten years, my family and friends— and came to New York to study English and American literature at Brooklyn College . . . fantasies had bloated my brain so much that . . . I never doubted that my new life would be full of excitement, opportunities and freedom» (67). Her entrance into American life is not to be paved

with gold. She is soon cured of her illusions of America and she begins to perceive reality as harsh and laden with contradictions. In the story entitled «Subway Rhapsody,» she observes: «This was too much, too bizarre, a white American selling the American dream in Cantonese and broken English to a poor Chinese woman» (66). Her double vision also allows her to discover similarities, and she realizes that Americans may not always be as different from the Chinese as one may think. Whereas she considers the Chinese passive, the New Yorkers are people whose «curiosity has been worn out by too much stimulation» (109).

Her stay in America, and the perception it offers, will allow her to review her past. The story «Song of the Four Seasons» is a recollection she has of her family from America, triggered at a concert, reveals that not everything was pain in her childhood, and that her mother was the one who introduced her to beauty through music. She will also realize that the family she had easily classified as one-dimensional contained more complexity that she could have imagined. When Seaweed returns to China for her father's funeral, she will fully come to terms with her warped perception of the past. «Perhaps we all remembered our past from a different point of view. Maybe perception was just a fraud» (142). Her recognition of the deceptive, and consequently unstable, quality of memory will challenge her views of her familial relationships and that of her bond with her country. She will therefore be forced to imaginatively recreate her past and the truth about her homeland, as well as her relationships with the people there. For instance, her belief that her mother did not love her is demolished by her younger sister, of whom she had always been bitterly jealous. «Mother really loves you, in her own way . . . She believed you could *gan dashi*—do big things— if you were trained properly . . . When you were not around, she never stopped telling us to learn from you. You know, sometimes I was so jealous that I wanted to knock you down with an ax. Mother loves you more than anyone else» (141).

The title story is the account of Seaweed's coming to terms with the choices she had made, principally the one to go and live in the United States, and the price she has had to pay. Here, China and America are viewed impassively, without mediation. Seaweed has experienced the inner workings of both countries as an adult and her vision is stripped of all idealism with regard to them. «'Come to America,' I said, conscious of having spoken these words so many times as if they were the only solution to life» (149). But America, she knows, is a land of dreams only when seen from far away. In an apparent refutation of the American Dream, she reflects on what her life may have been if she had stayed in China. «If I had stayed at Fudan . . . I would have become an assistant professor, had a family and children. Now I was still single. My so-called career—*dashi*— was nothing but teaching forty hours a week in an elementary school, and I was always worried whether the Board of Education would hire me for the next semester. The apartment I shared with four strangers in Flushing swarmed with roaches. I had two big lumps in my shoulders from stress and the heavy dull pain drove me crazy day and night . . . Why was I helping more people go abroad?» (143).

Nonetheless, the mysterious pull of America is stronger, and she continues to help her family come over, laden with hope. With her unblinkered view of both China and America, she still feels the tug-of-war between both in her own self. This highly personal drama is enacted on two stages, both which are more similar than they originally appear. As such, the drama is converted into a highly personal one, in which the true land of dreams is the protagonist herself, and her will to keep living and striving. Seaweed no longer really dreams, nor is her life a fulfillment of any of the dreams she had: life for her is converted into simple living. Interestingly, the last story, «Song of the Four Seasons» ends the collection with the suggestion of a return to China and a reaffirmation of personal identity and what one can achieve through this: «What mattered was my intention, my will to keep trying, always keep trying, no matter what» (179).

These short story cycles, as discourses on Chinese American self-definition have recollections and personal experiences of China as an important aspect of the creation of self. The questions the characters ask themselves are answered through narratives that articulate stories of survivors. The writers have turned to roots—family, community, and ethnicity—as sources of personal identity and creative expression. More importantly, these cycles show how the development or the preservation of an imaginative relationship with a homeland serves as a signifying factor towards growth and identity. The manner in which they, as other ethnic writers, have appropriated the short story cycle as a metaphor for the fragmentation and multiplicity of ethnic lives is itself an articulation of the between-culture position and the complex process towards self-identification. As such, the multiple impressionistic perspectives and fragmentation of simple linear history emphasize the subjectivity of experience and understanding. The subsequent narratives, a reflection of a tendency towards a hybrid form, provide enriching glimpses of identities and societies in the process of transformation and growth.

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