
Remembering the Railroad Grandfather in *China Men*

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The transcontinental railroad was finished. They Yippee'd like madmen. The white demon officials gave speeches. "The Greatest Feat of the Nineteenth Century," they said. "Only Americans could have done it," they said, which is true. Even if Ah Goong had not spent half of his gold on Citizenship Papers, he was an American for having built the railroad. ...

While white demons posed for photographs, the China Men dispersed. The Driving Out had begun. Ah Goong does not appear in railroad photographs.

—Maxine Hong Kingston, *China Men*

Maxine Hong Kingston's story in *China Men* about the completion of the first transcontinental railroad in the United States is filled with both pride and a keen sense of deprivation. The moment when her grandfather, Ah Goong, and his fellow Chinese railroad workers finished helping to build the "Greatest Feat of the Nineteenth Century" was also the moment when they were deemed obsolete and thus

ruthlessly driven out.¹ Ah Goong's absence from the railroad photographs not only challenges "photography's reality effect—its status as transparent historical record and 'truth,'" as David L. Eng suggests, but, more importantly, references a glaring historical injustice in need of redress.² As William F. Chew puts it, the absence of Chinese workers in "The Marriage of the Rails" photograph "screams to the world the lack of appreciation for their significant contribution to America."³ A descendant of the railroad workers, Chew, like Kingston, is enraged by, and agonizes over, the erasure of their forefathers. In response to this unjustified and unjustifiable whitewashing of the contributions of Chinese railroad workers, a number of Asian American writers attempt to right the wrong through the application of their creative energies, making the railroad story one of the most important themes in Chinese American literature.⁴ Among these, the imagined biography of Ah Goong's life as a railroad laborer in the United States in Kingston's "The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains" section in *China Men* has inspired numerous authors to participate in the collective project of remembering these silent and silenced railroad grandfathers. In this essay, I give a brief overview of selected critical writing on *China Men*, especially from the past two decades, to generate a critical framework for reading this seminal text, then offer a reading of Ah Goong's story as a literary memorialization of Chinese American railroad workers.

¹ Maxine Hong Kingston, *China Men* (New York: Vintage, 1980), 143.

² David L. Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 36.

³ William F. Chew, *Nameless Builders of the Transcontinental Railway: The Chinese Workers of the Central Pacific Railroad* (Bloomington, IN: Trafford, 2003), 89.

⁴ Sau-ling C. Wong comments that "Chinese American writers' claim to the railroad legacy" is an attempt to press for the "boundless mobility" that is fundamental to American nationalist discourse. Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 251. Julia H. Lee succinctly explains the prominence of the railroad theme in Asian American literature: "Trains crisscross the pages of contemporary Asian American literature. Frank Chin, Maxine Hong Kingston, David Henry Hwang, Sky Lee, Brian Leung, and Lisa See have all made the railroad an important part of their fictional and dramatic imaginings. Its popularity is no doubt due to the central and complicated place that the railroad—particularly the Transcontinental Railroad—occupies in the Asian American imaginary: central because Chinese laborers played such an indispensable role in its construction, and complicated because these contributions have been erased and generally ignored by the nation." Julia H. Lee, "The Railroad as Message in Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* and Frank Chin's 'Riding the Rails with Chickencoop Slim,'" *Journal of Asian American Studies* 18, no. 3 (2015): 265–266.

Reviewing *China Men*

A winner of the 1981 National Book Award for nonfiction, *China Men* is organized into six main sections and eleven vignettes and interchapters, in which the female narrator imagines and/or recollects the stories of her father, grandfather, great-grandfather, brother, and other Chinese American men. The text is most commonly read as a hybrid of various genres and a creative effort to “claim America,” as Kingston herself stated in an interview.⁵ Elaine Kim argues that Kingston’s position in *China Men* is “not anti-male”; rather, the book “is the portrait of men of diverse generations and experiences, heroes who lay claim on America for Chinese Americans and who love and care for each other.”⁶ In addition to the nationalist impulse of claiming to be rightfully American, the feminist approach is another common critical framework for accessing *China Men*. In fact, it is the female narrative voice that distinguishes “The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains” from other stories about the Chinese railroad workers. My reading of *China Men* combines the “claim on America” and feminist models and regards Kingston’s “father book” as a continuation of her feminist project in *The Woman Warrior* of inscribing a “counter-lineage” and searching for an artistic language. To recall the repressed history of Chinese Americans and her father’s Chinese story, the author mobilizes “three levels of dialogue to retrieve the repressed communal voice as well as the ‘father tongue’ for her narrator: a dialogue between what I call a Chinese American ‘counter-history’ and the official American history, an intellectual dialogue between the narrator and her father, and intellectual dialogues among Chinese legends and American stories.”⁷

However, not all critics accept Kingston’s claim that in writing *China Men* she intended to advance the political agenda of her family and other Asian Americans and make a claim on America. Jinqi Ling, for instance, disagrees with privileging “the

⁵ Timothy Pfaff, “Talk with Mrs. Kingston,” *New York Times Book Review*, June 15, 1980, 1. Kingston specifically declares: “What I am doing in this new book [*China Men*] is claiming America. ... That seems to be the common strain that runs [through] all the characters. In story after story Chinese American people are claiming America. ...”

⁶ Elaine Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and the Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 212.

⁷ Pin-chia Feng, *The Female Bildungsroman by Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), 133; Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (New York: Knopf, 1976).

correspondence between *China Men*'s textual articulation and its authorial intention."⁸ To him, the heroic discourse fails to address the violent incorporation of Chinese American male labor into American society; it also overlooks women's contributions to the making of Asian American communities.⁹ For Ling, "Kingston's feminist renegotiation"—carried out by mobilizing "the historical and the mythic" narrative movements—is significant because she fashioned "a strategy not only to expose the structural interdependence between institutionalized American history and the Asian American heroic imagination, but also to allow a reassertion of women's perspective that subverts the logic of Western historicism."¹⁰

Yoon Sun Lee's poststructuralist reading addresses the gendered spatial imagination in the text and asserts that *China Men* records Kingston's efforts to investigate the elusive father; it also shows how she eventually fails to achieve her goal.¹¹ Lee argues that in *China Men* Kingston presents "the myth of deterritorialized masculinity" but remains skeptical of it.¹² Ginette Verstraete attempts to problematize American mobility discourse by highlighting the fact that "national-identity-as-unlimited-mobility has paradoxically been made possible by the forced migration of a trans-national labor-force."¹³ Adopting a Bakhtinian model, Verstraete contends that the focus of *China Men* is "on the train as central *chronotope*, i.e. as a literal and figural *topos* (place, topic), around which American history gets reorganized, and stripped of its white, male ideality."¹⁴ It is Kingston's reconsideration of "travel as a mode of tracing various transcultural constraints" that allows the narrator to examine the power relations involved in the mobility discourse in terms of "racial, ethnic and gendered differences."¹⁵

Drawing on the memoirs by Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston and emphasizing the significance of the railroad's textuality in Asian American imagination, Julia H. Lee

⁸ Jinqi Ling, *Narrating Nationalisms: Ideology and Forms in Asian American Literatures* (New York: Oxford University Press 1998), 111.

⁹ Ling, *Narrating Nationalisms*, 119.

¹⁰ Ling, *Narrating Nationalisms*, 119.

¹¹ Yoon Sun Lee, "Kingston's *China Men*: Circumscribing the Romance of Deterritorialization," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 11, no. 2 (1998): 465.

¹² Lee, "Kingston's *China Men*," 466.

¹³ Ginette Verstraete, "Tracking the Nation: Material Sites of Trans-cultural Mobility in 'China Men,'" *Thamyris* 7 (2000): 180.

¹⁴ Verstraete, "Tracking the Nation," 184.

¹⁵ Verstraete, "Tracking the Nation," 198.

argues that “Kingston represents the railroad as narrative, one that must be read and interpreted for clues about her grandfather’s life.”¹⁶ For Lee, Kingston presents the railroad as “a system of signifiers that promises but can never fully capture the lives of the Chinese railroad workers”; by doing so she tries to alert her readers “to the contradictions that are constitutive of Chinese American history and experience and how the figure of her unknown and unknowable grandfather nevertheless informs her sense of self and community.”¹⁷

Arguing that “Chinese labor was one of the indispensable components in the development of capital and empire in the US and worldwide,” Caroline H. Yang stresses the importance of adopting “a comparative and transnational analytical model of critique that interrogates the intersections of the discourses of race, labor, and freedom in empire.”¹⁸ Yang contends that although the sea travel and hard labor on the sugar plantation in “The Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains” are reminiscent of “practices of the Western slave trade and the transatlantic passages,” Kingston’s text “underscores the notion of *consent* on the part of the workers,” suggesting that the workers endured a kind of “voluntary slavery.”¹⁹

By identifying the two silent female figures in *China Men*—the black grandmother from Hawai’i and the voiceless traveling prostitute at the railroad strike scene—Yang pinpoints the exclusionary nature and masculinist scope in the narrative of the Chinese male workers.²⁰ *China Men*, Yang contends, is not really about “excavating a lost past or validating Asian American citizenship or redeeming Asian American immigrant history—or even Asian American women’s history;” rather, it offers a critique of the racialized American empire by “exposing the unrecognized narratives in the US empire-state that has been founded on the exploitation of differentiated racialized bodies and the occlusion of their labor.”²¹

Interestingly, Jinqi Ling and Ginette Verstraete also comment on the complicity of Chinese workers in their own enslavement. For Ling, the book draws attention to the fact

¹⁶ Lee, “The Railroad as Message,” 267.

¹⁷ Lee, “The Railroad as Message,” 267.

¹⁸ Caroline H. Yang, “Indispensable Labor: The Worker as a Category of Critique in *China Men*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 56, no. 1 (2010): 64.

¹⁹ Yang, “Indispensable Labor,” 74.

²⁰ Yang, “Indispensable Labor,” 77.

²¹ Yang, “Indispensable Labor,” 82.

that “institutional history’s concealment of China men’s contribution to the making of America and China men’s self-concealment of their sacrifices and humiliations in order to maintain their moral pride have both produced problematic results.”²² Verstraete notices that the male immigrants may be blamed, in part, for their own exploitation. As Verstraete observes, “it is in their silence about the violence of the labor that the men’s history of migration—its connotations of racialized labor notwithstanding—becomes accessory to the exploitation and oppression underlying the American dream,” and “the silence of the ancestors is one that also keeps themselves in the margins of American history.”²³

These critiques of the passive complicity of early Chinese American workers in their own victimization significantly complicate the heroic narrative endorsed by Asian American critics such as Frank Chin and Shawn Wong, prompting us to rethink and reinterpret the historical experience of early Chinese immigrants in North America. The variegated interpretations of *China Men*, in fact, speak to the complexity of this ground-breaking text as well as the difficulties of re-viewing the history of early Chinese American immigrants. Whereas in the 1960s and 1970s advocates for Asian American nationalism felt an urgent need to propagate masculine heroism to counterbalance the prolonged practice of social emasculation of Asian American men, later critics whose work is informed by feminism, poststructuralism, transnationalism, diaspora studies, and other critical methodologies conceptualize Asian American history differently. While the early stage of Asian American criticism can be characterized by a literary “feud” between feminism and heroism, as King-Kok Cheung delineates in her article “The Woman Warrior versus the Chinaman Pacific,”²⁴ the field today has moved beyond the model of gendered oppositions and entertains much more diversified concerns. Cheung identifies a “shift” in Asian American literary studies from “identity politics—with its stress on cultural nationalism and American nativity” to “heterogeneity and diaspora” at the end of the twentieth century.²⁵ New concerns and critical possibilities continue to surface; Caroline Yang’s reading of *China Men* within the frame of empire studies is a good example.

²² Ling, *Narrating Nationalisms*, 122.

²³ Verstraete, “Tracking the Nation,” 187.

²⁴ King-Kok Cheung, “The Woman Warrior versus the Chinaman Pacific: Must a Chinese American Critic Choose between Feminism and Heroism?” in *Conflicts in Feminisms*, ed. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (234–251) (New York: Routledge, 1990).

²⁵ King-Kok Cheung, “Re-Viewing Asian American Literary Studies,” in *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, ed. King-Kok Cheung (1–36) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1.

On the other hand, despite the fact that an unconditional embrace of masculinist heroism and nationalism can easily lead to myopia when it comes to gender and race, it would be a mistake to overlook the physical tenacity, spiritual perseverance, and intellectual resourcefulness of the early immigrant workers who weathered the transpacific passage and harsh social and working environments of North America. Seminal texts such as *China Men*, with their nuanced representations of Chinese American immigrant forefathers, help to shed light on multiple facets of their lived experiences. Take Kingston's railroad grandfather, Ah Goong, for example. The crazy old man in a greatcoat who is excluded from family photos and who reminds his grandchildren of perverted "exhibitionists" is nothing close to the image of a pioneering hero suggested by the title "the Gold Mountain Brave" (金山勇士), the Mandarin translation of *China Men*.²⁶ But Ah Goong is one of the Chinese workers who "banded the nation North and South, East and West, with crisscrossing steel" and "the binding and building ancestors of this place."²⁷ As Kingston observes in a video recording, the "binding and building" imagery stands as her "poetic vision" for the Central Pacific since the transcontinental railroad project promised to bind together the divided country after the Civil War.²⁸ Ah Goong and his fellow laborers mended the broken country with steely rails. Yet racist persecution and discriminatory laws allowed Ah Goong no claim on American land and rendered him despised by both mainstream American society and his Chinese family. It is this injustice against working-class immigrants such as Ah Goong that needs urgent redress. Moreover, Ah Goong is one of the few *gam saan haak* (Gold Mountain guests 金山客) outspoken about their hard lives in North America. His heroism, which produced his legacy—the material site of the transcontinental railroad—is that of a survivor who passes on vanishing stories. The oral transmission of such stories is all the more important because so much of the history of the nineteenth-century Chinese railroad workers has been lost.

One might argue that rather than being a testimony to masculine heroism, *China Men* is permeated with an androgynous vision. In her interview about her novel *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* with Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Kingston quotes Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and William Carlos Williams's *In the American Grain* as the most important

²⁶ Kingston, *China Men*, 124.

²⁷ Kingston, *China Men*, 144.

²⁸ Barre Fong, "2013 RRW Maxine Hong Kingston 1," Vimeo Internet Archives, MPEG video, 35:04, <https://vimeo.com/78751720>.

literary influences in her writing career.²⁹ The literary figures of Woolf's androgynous Orlando and Williams's maternal Abraham Lincoln help to liberate the narrator in *China Men* "from gender and cultural constraints and become her literary predecessors of gender crossing."³⁰ Readers of Kingston's *China Men* may detect an androgynous narrator who is both "sensitive to the men's hardship and to feminist issues."³¹ Ah Goong, with his unconventional preference for girls and imaginative storytelling skill, is not a typical patriarch either but a fitting ancestor figure for the granddaughter narrator.

For all the possible pitfalls in the "claim on America" paradigm, we should not completely overlook its importance to Asian American studies in general and *China Men* in particular. As Sau-ling Wong observes in the illuminating "Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads," we need to apply multiple strategies "in both community-building and scholarship to emphasize both the unities and the differences of Asian American experiences of culture."³² Even though the reorientation to a diasporic perspective is a necessary and positive move in Asian American studies, still, to stake a claim in America by "establishing the Asian American presence in the context of the United States' national cultural legacy and contemporary cultural production," as Wong suggests, is important to Asian American communities.³³

Going back to *China Men*, throughout the book we detect a prevalent sense of insecurity on the part of Chinese American communities. The narrator recalls her wish to visit China so that she could compare the country that she has imagined with one that is "really out there."³⁴ Yet she also anticipates many potential obstacles: "I would like to go to China if I can get a visa and—more difficult—permission from my family, who are afraid that applying for a visa would call attention to us."³⁵ The fear of unwanted attention and the calamitous consequences—being put "in the relocation camps during

²⁹ Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "Interview with Maxine Hong Kingston," *American Literary History* 3, no. 4 (1991): 784.

³⁰ Feng, *The Female Bildungsroman*, 134.

³¹ Feng, *The Female Bildungsroman*, 134.

³² Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, "Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads," *Amerasia* 21, no. 1–2 (1995): xiii.

³³ Wong, "Denationalization Reconsidered," 16.

³⁴ Kingston, *China Men*, 84.

³⁵ Kingston, *China Men*, 84.

the next witch hunt for Communists,” even facing forced deportation—overshadows the desired trip.³⁶

The history of Japanese American internment during World War II and McCarthyism are concrete examples of how American citizens could be unjustly persecuted because of racial differences and political beliefs. The other part of the potential hazards concerned their Chinese relatives, who “would get in trouble for having American capitalist connections,” captures the palpable sense of anxiety and distrust experienced by the older generations of Chinese immigrants right after the “normalization” of diplomatic relations between China and the United States.³⁷ Read together, the narrator’s quandary about visa application to her ancestral land vividly demonstrates the keenly felt sense of precariousness and ambivalence for Chinese on both sides of the Pacific, especially around the time of normalization in the 1970s. For Kingston and her parents’ generation, it is important to be able to claim a rightful place within the United States. What follows is a reading of the railroad grandfather’s journey and how his accomplishments properly accord him the title “an American ancestor, a holding and homing ancestor of this place.”³⁸

Recollecting Ah Goong’s Railroad Journey

While narrating a communal story of Chinese America, Kingston chooses to adopt an intimate and individualist perspective. In typical Kingston style, the reconstruction of the life of her railroad grandfather starts with her childhood memory and moves seamlessly from the “realistic” to the imaginative. “The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains” section opens with concrete, material recollections: “The train used to cross the sky. The house jumped and dust shook from the attic.”³⁹ The omnipresence of the railroad, together with details of the hovering hoboes, childhood games, and “moaning” cows, constitutes the early life of the narrator at “a special spot of the earth, Stockton, the only city on the Pacific coast with three railroads.”⁴⁰ Even when the railroad is abandoned and dismantled, the remnants—the logs and spikes— are readily recycled for the family’s household use. Most importantly, the constant reminder from the adults—

36. Kingston, *China Men*, 84.

37. Kingston, *China Men*, 84.

38. Kingston, *China Men*, 149.

39. Kingston, *China Men*, 122.

40. Kingston, *China Men*, 123.

“[y]our grandfather built the railroad”—is essential to the young narrator’s childhood memories.⁴¹

As in the transmission of other family stories, the stories about Ah Goong’s three trips to the Gold Mountain are passed down through the narrator’s mother, the only person who would care for, and listen to, the elderly man. With the inheritance of her mother’s marvelous skill of “talk story,” the granddaughter narrator makes good use of Ah Goong’s twice-told tales, embellishing them with imagined details and carrying on the intergenerational storytelling relay. The textualization of these oral tales, in a sense, becomes material evidence of the “wondrous country, really gold” that Ah Goong has found, as real as her mother’s wedding ring forged from Ah Goong’s hard-earned Gold Mountain gold.⁴² In reality, though, the stories are actually of hard labor, racist discrimination, and violent dispossession.

In this miniature biography, Kingston concisely presents her railroad grandfather’s Gold Mountain dreams and nightmares. Preoccupied by the imagined riches of the Gold Mountain, when Ah Goong first starts working on the Central Pacific, he is always looking for hidden, exotic treasures: he eagerly seeks “gold veins and ore” in the root hole of the giant redwood that he helps to cut down; the stars in the night sky are “diamonds, crystals, silver, snow, ice.”⁴³ His efforts to realize his Gold Mountain dream continue throughout his journey in the American West. When the Chinese workers go on strike, Ah Goong goes sifting for gold.⁴⁴ He spends one bag of gold for a citizenship paper from a fake “Citizenship Judge” and another for a gold ring in the shape of “two hands clasping in a handshake.”⁴⁵

⁴¹ Kingston, *China Men*, 122.

⁴² Kingston, *China Men*, 124.

⁴³ Kingston, *China Men*, 126.

⁴⁴ Kingston, *China Men*, 139.

⁴⁵ Kingston, *China Men*, 140 and 148.



Figure 1. In her video interview with Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Maxine Hong Kingston shows her mother's ring. According to Kingston, the ring miraculously survived the 1991 Oakland, California, fire in which her house was destroyed. Barre Fong, "2013 RRW Maxine Hong Kingston 2," Vimeo Internet Archives, MPEG video, 00:00–01:40, 36:39–36:44, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l9aQ2Coc5hs&t=34m35s>.

In both cases he is clearly being tricked by European American confidence men, but Ah Goong, with his peasant optimism, remains certain that he has earned his citizenship. To show how Ah Goong has been physically affected by his experience in the Gold Mountain, the narrator records how he is extra sensitive to “crackles, bangs, gunshots,” and how Chinese New Year’s fireworks would take him back to “the blasting in the Sierras,” where railroad laborers were testing the newly invented dynamite to speed up construction work.⁴⁶ The recollection of spatial and temporal links to his past through acoustic experiences suggests the lasting—sometimes nostalgic but oftentimes traumatic—legacy of the railroad years on the Chinese workers.

In enumerating Ah Goong’s various tasks on the Central Pacific—cutting down gigantic redwoods, blowing up stumps with gunpowder, riding in a hanging basket, tunneling through hard granite, dynamiting his way through the mountains, and “laying and bending and hammering the ties and rails” —Kingston is in fact offering a condensed biography of the lives of Chinese workers on the railroad.⁴⁷ The list of the kinds of work

⁴⁶ Kingston, *China Men*, 124 and 125.

⁴⁷ Kingston, *China Men*, 133.

undertaken shows the traces of Kingston's extended research on the construction of the Central Pacific.⁴⁸

What makes this chronicle different from historical documents are the physical and psychological details presented through Ah Goong's consciousness.⁴⁹ In Sau-ling Wong's reading paradigm, if presenting the history of Chinese railroad workers is an absolute "Necessity" for Kingston as a descendent of a railroad worker, the imaginative and elaborated embellishments become a kind of "Extravagance."⁵⁰ For instance, Ah Goong's first job on the railroad is to cut down a redwood, which is essential to the railroad construction work. "Train cars, fuel, bridges and trestles, snow sheds, and other facilities all used wood," as Sue Fawn Chung points out.⁵¹ After describing in minute detail the way in which Ah Goong spends a whole day axing the tree and finally succeeds in felling it, the narrative turns figurative:

*The tree swayed and slowly dived to earth, creaking and screeching like a green animal. ... Hardly any branches broke; the tree sprang, bounced, pushed at the ground with its arms. ... The trunk lay like a long red torso; sap ran from its cuts like crying blind eyes. At last it stopped fighting.*⁵²

The anthropomorphic representation of the tree transforms the mundane lumbering work into a battle of epic magnitude, implicitly celebrating Ah Goong's achievement in beating the arboreal adversary. While emphasizing the loneliness and victimization of the workers, Kingston has not forgotten to capture their moments of victory.

⁴⁸ Kingston, *China Men*, 143.

⁴⁹ Kingston mentions in her video interview with Fishkin that she places a lot of emphasis on "bodily memory" and physical knowledge in the book. When she was writing about the physical labor in *China Men*, she tried to work with the tools beforehand so that she could capture the sense of using those tools. Barre Fong, "2013 RRW Maxine Hong Kingston 2," Vimeo Internet Archives, MPEG video, 04:18–07:24, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l9aQ2Coc5hs&t=34m35s>.

⁵⁰ For Wong, the tensions between Necessity and Extravagance represent generational differences: "The terms Necessity and Extravagance signify two contrasting modes of existence and operation, one contained, survival-driven and conservation-minded, the other attracted to freedom, excess, emotional expressiveness, and autotelism" (Wong 1993,13).

⁵¹ Sue Fawn Chung, *Chinese in the Woods: Logging and Lumbering in the American West* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 5.

⁵² Kingston, *China Men*, 125.

In addition to the stories of physical labor, in the portrayal of her railroad grandfather as a basketman, Kingston attempts to offer an in-depth exploration of the workers' desires and mindscapes. Although we have scarce evidence that the work method described was ever used on the Central Pacific, basket work along the railway becomes the stuff of legend because of Kingston's descriptions of it.⁵³ The narrator describes how Ah Goong first feels a sense of freedom followed by "crazy" suicidal thoughts while in the basket confronting the awesome sublimity of the Sierras, with "nothing between him and air but thin rattan."⁵⁴ Through Ah Goong we experience the deadly hazards involved in riding the basket over ravines to blast the rock face with gunpowder; through his eyes, we also witness people being blown up or falling to their deaths. The traumatic impact these events have on the crew is presented in a collective "falling dream" after one such accident: "At night Ah Goong woke up falling, though he slept on the ground, and heard other men call out in their sleep."⁵⁵

Later on, the workers learned to relax and play a little by riding "the basket, swooping in wide arcs"; they would twist "the ropes and let them unwind like tops."⁵⁶ Yet the most "playful" parts come from Ah Goong's attempts to satisfy his natural needs in the basket—he would piss overboard and even masturbate in the basket:

*One beautiful day, dangling over a new valley, not the desire to urinate but sexual desire clutched him so hard he bent over in the basket. He curled up, overcome by beauty and fear, which shot to his penis. He tried to rub himself calm. Suddenly he stood up tall and squirted out into space. "I am fucking the world," he said. The world's vagina was big, big as the sky, big as a valley. He grew a habit: whenever he was lowered in the basket, his blood rushed to his penis, and he fucked the world.*⁵⁷

For Yoon Soon Lee, in this passage Ah Goong, "passively lowered and abjectly suspended," possesses no real agency in these seemingly rebellious acts. Rather, Lee

⁵³ Recent research uncovered by the Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project and detailed in Gordon H. Chang's forthcoming monograph suggest that baskets may, in fact, have been utilized by the workers. Gordon H. Chang, *Ghost of Gold Mountain: The Epic Story of the Chinese Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019).

⁵⁴ Kingston, *China Men*, 128.

⁵⁵ Kingston, *China Men*, 129.

⁵⁶ Kingston, *China Men*, 130.

⁵⁷ Kingston, *China Men*, 130.

regards them as responses to “the tension between ‘beauty and fear,’” and “an oscillation between helplessness and empowerment.” The height and depth of the valley fail to achieve the metaphorical level of sublimity, presenting only “the banal physical realities of Ah Goong’s situation, and the sublime is reduced to his quickly routinized and inconsequential physical excitement.”⁵⁸ However, I believe we can still read the basket work episode in a more positive light. Problematic as is Ah Goong’s act of “fucking the world,” Kingston calls our attention to exactly “the banal physical realities” faced by the workers.⁵⁹ The very fact that Ah Goong and other workers can still find playful ways to contend with these extremely harsh realities is indicative of their extraordinary spirit of resilience. Later, when Ah Goong is forced to engage in the dark tunnel work, he misses the days when he rode the basket in the open air.⁶⁰

One of the most memorable moments in the history of Chinese railroad workers is the strike in June 1867, in which the Chinese demand equal treatment with their white coworkers. According to Sucheng Chan, this was the “largest strike undertaken by Chinese in the nineteenth century.”⁶¹ European American artists visited the Chinese camps to draw pictures for the newspapers. In some sketches, these workers appear larger than life:

*The men posed bare-chested, their fists clenched, showing off their arms and backs. The artists sketched them as perfect young gods reclining against rocks, wise expressions on their handsome noble-nosed faces, long torsos with lean stomachs, a strong arm extended over a bent knee, long fingers holding a pipe, a rope of hair over a wide shoulder.*⁶²

These newspaper caricatures of power and strength present the Chinese workers in their most positive and heroic image. No longer silent, and refusing to remain complicit in their exploitation, they take the revolutionary step of fighting for racial equality and labor rights. Although some artists insisted on perpetuating fanciful stereotypes,

⁵⁸ Lee, “Kingston’s *China Men*,” 479.

⁵⁹ My reading finds the description of the grandfather's sexual release problematic because it contains “disturbing sexual violence and cliched archetypal imagery.” Feng, *The Female Bildungsroman*, 151. However, it also shows that Kingston is not afraid to probe the dark psyche of the Chinese workers who have suffered severe sexual deprivation.

⁶⁰ Kingston, *China Men*, 131.

⁶¹ Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (Boston: Twayne, 1991), 81.

⁶² Kingston, *China Men*, 141–142.

picturing the Chinese strikers as “faeries with antenna[e] for eyebrows and brownies with elvish pigtailed...” Kingston succeeds in paying homage to Ah Goong and his fellow workers by retrieving their heroic figures from the forgotten archive.⁶³ Even while presenting this historical moment, Kingston manages to frame the strike with an invented legend, adding an element of imagination to the historical event. Borrowing from the story of how Han Chinese revolt against their tyrannical Mongolian ruler by hiding a message inside mooncakes, the narrator describes how the Chinese workers passed strike plans to other camps through a secret message wrapped inside the dumplings for the Dragon Boat Festival “with a special pattern of red string.”⁶⁴ This imagined detail stresses the collectivity and resourcefulness of the Chinese when faced with powerful opponents of another race.

The most imaginative part in Kingston’s retelling of Ah Goong’s life as a railroad worker is the story of the Spinning Girl and the Cowboy from the beginning of Ah Goong’s work on the railroad, exemplifying what Jinqi Ling terms the mythic narrative movement of the book.⁶⁵ The legend is introduced to accentuate Ah Goong’s loneliness in the Sierras. The narrator describes how Ah Goong tries to comfort himself by imaginatively linking China and the strange American landscape through familiar stars:

As spring turned into summer, and he lay under that sky, he saw the order in the stars. He recognized constellations from China. There—not a cloud but the Silver River, and there, on either side of it—Altair and Vega, the Spinning Girl and the Cowboy, far and far apart. He felt his heart breaking of loneliness at so much blue-black space between star and star. The railroad he was building would never lead him to his family. ...

*Pretending a little girl was listening, he told the story about the Spinning Girl and the Cowboy. ...*⁶⁶

The inclusion of Chinese legends in her texts is one of Kingston’s signature narrative strategies. As Alex Zwerdling observes, the subject matter of her books is considered “‘exotic’ (foreign, mysterious, esoteric)” to the mainstream readers, yet “there is no cultural facilitator for readers unfamiliar with the patterns of family life in Chinese American communities” or the many Chinese legends and myths one may find in

⁶³ Kingston, *China Men*, 142.

⁶⁴ Kingston, *China Men*, 138.

⁶⁵ Ling, *Narrating Nationalisms*, 119.

⁶⁶ Kingston, *China Men*, 126.

Kingston's writing.⁶⁷ Without explicit explanations of the myths and legends, a reader without sufficient cultural background would need to undertake further research to ferry out the connotations of these inserted stories. Yet here the Spinning Girl and the Cowboy legend is chosen precisely because its implication is relatively self-evident. This legend, allegedly the origin of Chinese Valentine's Day, is all about the affects of love, including the pain of separation and the joy of reunion. Compared to the celestial lovers who, with the help of magpies, could reach across the "galaxy river" to reunite once a year, Ah Goong suffers greater emotional deprivation as the railroad would only take him farther west, and there is no hope of reuniting with his family on the other side of the Pacific before he finishes the construction work. What makes this legend fitting for Ah Goong's railroad story, in addition to the affective aspect, is the transportation theme. In her video interview with Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Kingston mentions that it is a story about transportation; the magpie bridge across the Milky Way is there to bring the lovers together.⁶⁸

Furthermore, the lovers are from the working class; they are punished because they are "so engrossed in each other" that they neglect their assigned work of spinning and herding.⁶⁹ The insertion of the legend also highlights Ah Goong's status as a storyteller: when no one in the work crew wishes to listen to him, he communicates the story to his imagined audience, a little girl, whom he would have loved to claim as his own. This sense of companionship, together with "two familiars" he has found, "magpies and stars," helps him weather his years in the lonely wilderness.⁷⁰

The final part of Ah Goong's story records another of his trips to the Gold Mountain where there is no longer a "railroad to sell his strength to."⁷¹ He not only fails to contribute any income to the enrichment of the family, but he gets his sons in debt when they have to ransom him back to China. The grandfather's failure partially explains his low status in the family. To the granddaughter, however, his contributions to the transcontinental railroad are always inspiring. Thus the cryptic statement at the beginning of "The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains" section: "Grandfather left a railroad for his message: We had to go somewhere difficult. Ride a train. Go

⁶⁷ Alex Zwerdling, *The Rise of the Memoir* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 188.

⁶⁸ Barre Fong, "2013 RRW Maxine Hong Kingston 2," Vimeo Internet Archives, MPEG video, 37:15, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l9aQ2Coc5hs>.

⁶⁹ Kingston, *China Men*, 127.

⁷⁰ Kingston, *China Men*, 127.

⁷¹ Kingston, *China Men*, 148.

somewhere important. In case of danger, the train was to be ready for us.”⁷² Ah Goong, who has “built a railroad out of sweat,” continues to inspire his Chinese American descendants to explore the country that he helped to bind together.⁷³ At the same time, there is always an imminent sense of insecurity that is an integral part of the grandfather’s railroad legacy. By telling stories about her railroad grandfather, Kingston demonstrates the power of literature in historical remembering. While it is likely that there will be more critical readings of her work in the future, there is no denying that Ah Goong’s American journey in *China Men* remains one of the most moving portrayals of nineteenth-century Chinese railroad workers in Chinese American literary history.

⁷² Kingston, *China Men*, 123.

⁷³ Kingston, *China Men*, 149.

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