

On the Reconstruction of the Chinese American History in *China Men*

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Abstract—Approaching from Michel Foucault's notion of history, mainly his counter-memory, the paper explores how Kingston reconstructs Chinese American history through the main strategy of counter-memory—talk-story. Through retelling how the male immigrants in her family participated in constructing America, rooted in America and served in the army, Kingston, with these transgenerational adventures as an archetype, discloses the discontinuity of American history and reconstructs an alternate Chinese American history from the perspective of Chinese Americans. The counter-memory in *China Men* highlights Chinese Americans' outstanding contributions, prowess and masculinity, thus helping to carve a place for Chinese Americans in American history, recreate the new images of Chinese Americans and subvert the stereotypical images of Chinese Americans as submissive, feminine, and lack of manhood and prowess.

Index Terms—China Men, reconstruct Chinese American history, counter-memory, talk-story

I. INTRODUCTION

As is well known, the early Chinese Americans were the co-creators of American history, having done indelible contributions to the development and construction of the country. However, their experiences and conditions have rarely been presented and unjustly dealt with in American history, literary works and other cultural media. In the domain of American official history, early Chinese immigrants' contributions to the making of America are either minimized or obliterated. Some books of American history show that Chinese American history is not dealt with justly. Also, the images of Chinese Americans are rarely dealt with justly. Throughout the history of Anglo-American literature, there are almost no positive images of Chinese. They are only minor images used to serve as a foil to the white and usually depicted as submissive, feminine, inscrutable, coward, indifferent, and lack of manhood and prowess.

The silenced or distorted situation of early Chinese Americans in American history and literature arouses the indignation of Chinese American writers. A lot of them take up their pens to refute these stereotypes and reclaim a voice and position for these silenced ancestors in American history, among which, Maxine Hong Kingston (1940-), one of the most influential Chinese American women writers, is a typical representative.

China Men (1980) is another masterpiece following up *The Woman Warrior* (1976) by Maxine Hong Kingston, *China Men* is usually regarded as a collection of memoir, which records the immigration odyssey of the males in Kingston's family from the early sojourners and immigrants to the war generation four generations later. These undaunted, tenacious, and ambitious immigrants from China have their individual stories during their immigration course to America, which provide a prototypical history of all Chinese American immigrants.

China Men is episodic, composed of six distinct but related principal stories about the men in Kingston's family. The first section "The Father from China" is the story about Kingston's father, in which Kingston tries to imagine the essential events of her father's life in China from his auspicious birth and through his education to his emigration to America. Then she relates how her father arrived in America and was betrayed by his laundry partners in New York. Following are two sections that recount respectively the adventures of her great grandfather(Bak Goong) and grandfather(Ah Goong). "The Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountain" is about Bak Goong's experiences on the Hawaiian sugar cane plantation as a contract worker; "The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountain" tells of the heroic story of Ah Goong during the construction of the First Transcontinental Railroad. "The Making of More Americans" illustrates identity problem facing Chinese Americans. Each protagonist in this part for a time was plunged into a state of agony and indecision, yet they finally learned to establish their identity as Chinese Americans. Father returns in "The American Father" as the manager of a gambling house, a disheartened man sunk into depression after unemployment, then the owner of a New Port laundry, and finally a new American with a house and business. The book ends with "The Brother in Vietnam". This is a section devoted to the American-born generations who joined the American army and won the solid position for their family in America.

Kingston in *China Men* successfully rehabilitates the heroic images of Chinese Americans and reconstructs their history, but she does not rigidly adhere to the authentic records about Chinese Americans as traditional historians usually do. Instead, she reconstructs history through interweaving family stories, historical facts and myths. Approaching from Michel Foucault's notion of history, mainly his counter-memory, this paper focuses on exploring how Kingston reconstructs Chinese American history through telling her family stories.

II. RETELLING THE EPIC OF CHINESE AMERICANS

Traditionally, history is regarded as an intellectual discipline purporting to record the truth about the past. Thus what the historian writes in the history are unquestionable facts. However, at the turn of the 20th twentieth century, with the impetus of Deconstruction, the notion of history as an authority was challenged. Many philosophers, historians claim that history can never provide us with the truth or give us a totally accurate picture of the past events or the worldview of a group of people, because all histories are subjective, written by people whose personal biases affect their interpretation of the past. They insist that the traditional devices for constructing a comprehensive view of history “from discreet and apparently insignificant truths and according to a rigorous method” (Foucault, 1977, p.53) must be systematically dismantled. These philosophers’ propositions of rejudging and scrutinizing traditional history lead to the decline of the authority of traditional history as well as the possibility for the ethnic minorities to reclaim their suppressed voices in dominant history.

Michel Foucault, an eminent French philosopher, and a “historian of systems of thought”, is the leading figure of this critical trend. In most of his works, Foucault shows his keen concern with history and most of his efforts in these works are to subvert the authority of traditional history and create “effective histories”, in which various suppressed knowledge and discourse can be presented.

In his *The Archeology of Knowledge* and *The Order of Things*, Foucault rejects the traditional notion of history as a “straightforward narrative”, “living continuity”, “organic development” or “the project of existence”, but points out that this history is full of “phenomena of rupture, of discontinuity”, or “radical breaks” (Foucault, 1972, p.5-6). In other words, the traditional historical texts just simplify and theorize the vicissitude of actual history, ignoring the historical contingency. So, according to Foucault, the history which usually functions as truth or is taken as truth actually covers up countless deliberate or non-deliberate interstices or errors.

Foucault further enriches his views of history by putting it into a larger social and political context. In his collection of lectures, *Power/Knowledge*, he states that power and knowledge are deeply related. Knowledge is gained through power. Once one has obtained power, he or she then gains the knowledge that comes with it. Thus in a society where various forces or ideologies fight for presence, the dominant one always has in hand the power of truth, the power of disseminating and judging knowledge (Foucault 1980, p.34). Judged against the ideology or the taste of the dominant power, some historical knowledge is turned into “subjugated knowledge” which is either “buried” or regarded as “disqualified” and “illegitimate” (p.81-83). Therefore, knowledge or discourse is just the result of the interplay of various powers. By applying this theory to the field of history, we find that history as a kind of knowledge or discourse is just the product of the operations of power. This indeed explains well why the history of ethnic minority is usually minimized, silenced or even distorted.

After revealing the nature of traditional history, Foucault puts forward his propositions of writing history. Influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche’s genealogy, Foucault envisions the necessity of applying the genealogical analysis to history-writing so as to unveil the knowledge or discourse suppressed by grand narrative. Thus in his collection of essays, *Language, Counter-memory, Practice*, he raises the new concept of counter-memory. According to Foucault, memory is in the service of traditional history, of knowledge as transmitted, inscribed, sanctioned, and possessing the unmerited status of truth (Cheung, 1993, p.15). Conversely, counter-memory, defined as “a transformation of history into a totally different form of time” (Foucault, 1977, p.160), is a radical practice to resist the supposed continuity of traditional history, and to dispel the notion of history as immutable truth and discourse (p.156). To counteract the traditional way of recoding history, counter-memory furnishes an “effective history”, which “seeks to make visible all of those discontinuity that cross us” (p.162).

Thus Foucault’s theory of discontinuity exposes the traditional history’s pretense and its teleological reliance on continuities whereas his counter-memory renders a license for writing history in a radical way to refute the traditional history.

Examining Kingston’s way of writing history in *China Men*, the author finds it is in accordance with this effective way in many aspects. Firstly, the counter-memory in the book brings to light that American history, in a sense, rests on layers of knowledge where discontinuity exists. Written to follow the rule that the history of American is Euro-Anglo centric, it contains discrimination, exclusion or even distortion of ethnic minority people and their historical experiences, especially of the Chinese Americans and their history.

Secondly, by typically presenting what Foucault calls “historical monuments” (Foucault, 1972, p.7), such as Hawaiian plantation, gold mine, railroad (especially the First Transcontinental Railroad), and other factual materials, the book retrieves Chinese American history from oblivion, and shows its idiosyncrasy from the perspective of Chinese American people. Moreover, the foreground of Chinese American’s heroism and masculinity causes the collapse of various stereotypes imposed on Chinese Americans.

Thirdly, the revision of the past is profoundly inlaid with the present and future. While functioning as corrective to the orthodox history, counter-memory in *China Men* is to envision a bright future. It is conducive for the Chinese Americans to establish their culture and identity.

Counter-memory in *China Men* is chiefly presented through recounting Kingston’s family saga. So this paper elaborates on how Kingston rehabilitates the heroic images of Chinese men and excavates them from silenced nameless coolies to American pioneers whose names are worthy to be enshrined in American history by retelling her forefathers’

heroic stories in taming Hawaiian plantation, building the railroad, and partaking in the defense and construction of America.

A. *Highlighting the Heroic Feats of Chinese Americans*

Kingston's talk-story retraces back to her great grandfather, Bak Goong, who worked in the Hawaiian plantation. Like many other Chinese laborers, Bak Goong was lured to Hawaiian plantation as contract laborer by the recruiter, who boasted of the golden chances of making money. Locked in the belowdeck and suffering vomiting for three months at sea, Bak Goong finally reached the island of Hawaii. However, Bak Goong found that the reality in Hawaii was completely different from the promises. "There was no farm, no sugarcane ready to tend", only "a tangle of trees so thick that they shut out sunlight" (Kingston, 1980, p.98). The work there was backbreaking. Bak Goong and other Chinese workers were forced to work each day from 5.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. under extreme heat or rain. Besides, they had to observe the absurd discriminatory rule of being forbidden to talk during work. Otherwise, they would be fined or punished.

Despite the harsh natural environment and stern restrictions, Bak Goong, a resilient and resourceful man, was not discouraged. Instead, he determined to conquer this patch of wilderness the day he amounted the island. Bak Goong's adventure in Hawaii fully demonstrates a pioneer's spirit. He endured long working hours, laboring diligently and well on the sugar plantation where daily he cut sugar cane twice the height of a man. He even managed to work when he was so ill that he had to embrace the cane stalks to stay upright. After several years of such unremitting efforts, Bak Goong and his peers "hacked a farm out of the wilderness" (p.98), making themselves the founding fathers of a place thousands of miles away from their homeland.

Compared with Bak Goong, Ah Goong's (grandfather's) work in constructing the railroad along the rugged Sierra Nevada valley was more dangerous and arduous. Ah Goong spent six years building the railroad, witnessing the agony and hardships that thousands of the Chinese experienced in this great project. After he and other Chinese workers blew up clear all tree trunks with gunpower, Ah Goong changed his job as basketmen to set dynamite charges down to the deep valley. This was a dangerous job. Ah Goong and other basketmen had to stay inside the wicker baskets that were lowered down one after another to the cliffs and sheer drops. Death became a frequent thing when dangling in the half sky because any unbalanced action would result in the turning of the baskets and the basketmen would be thrown into fathomless valleys. Kingston thus writes metaphorically that these men were digging and dynamiting their way into hells (p.137).

When the basketmen work was finished, Ah Goong then drilled the granite and inched forward strenuously in the tunnels for another three years. This was also a tough job. While wrestling with this firm and stubborn granite, Ah Goong had to combat with the severity of the weather. The winter of 1866 was one of the hardest period Ah Goong and other Chinese workers experienced during the project. Because they were compelled to work through the heavy snow winter, many Chinese workers were frozen to death and their bodies only revealed when the snow melted the next spring.

With a deep sympathy for these Chinese who died silently in an alien land, Kingston wrathfully points out: "There is no record of how many [Chinese] died building the railroad. Or maybe it was the demons doing the counting and Chinamen not worth counting" (p.136).

Thousands of Chinese laborers like Ah Goong spared no efforts, including their lives, to build the railroad. They undertook most of the dangerous and hard job of the project, such as clearing trees, exploding cliffs and pounding granite to lay tracks. Undoubtedly, the First Transcontinental Railroad which is hailed as "the Greatest Feat" in the history of mankind crystallizes the Chinese laborers' sweat, blood, and lives. Kingston thus proudly declares, "They were the binding and building ancestors of this place" (p.144).

The two founding fathers, Bak Goong and Ah Goong, are prototypes of the family hero who are fashioned in the image of the valiant, long-suffering Prometheus. Venturing into unmapped territory in search of adventure and opportunity, they carve tillable and habitable land out of the mountains, labor and survive on the frontier. Yet the real test of their manhood is based not so much on their lofty achievements as on the endurance of great physical danger and psychological stress. Throughout their adventures, they had to endure insufferable loneliness, illness, frustration, fought homesickness, lovesickness and institutionalized oppression.

Compared with great grandfather and grandfather's colorful adventures and glorious feats, father's story seems flat and obscure. Father came to America with a hope of rooting himself and his family in America. However, the American dream failed him, and the harsh reality destroyed his aspirations little by little. After the gambling house closed, father gradually lost not only his voice but also his humor. He would not break his silence except screaming and cursing in his dream. Father turned from an eloquent scholar and poet into a silent and angry abuser of his children and wife.

However, father cannot be labeled simply as a weakling and failure. Like his forefathers, he too undertook the epic journey, not once, but twice. First, he traveled a great distance on foot to sit for the imperial examination, and his successful performance earned him the rank of scholar. Then he crossed the ocean to the Gold Mountain. Owing to his daring ambition of taking root there, he had to face more obstacles and challenges. Baba's courage lies in his silent endurance in an adverse milieu as well as his shouldering the responsibility of raising a big family. In addition, to remain silent does not mean total submission. To a certain degree, it is a subtle manner to protest. When father had to deal with the demon police, he either kept silent or told lies to free himself out of trouble.

The greatness of father also lies in his final freeing himself from despair. He bought a new laundry and a big house in America, and started his new life in America. His passion, humor and voice were restored. He kept a variety of birds, raised animals, built roads, told stories, sang song, planted vegetables and trees, among which some “take years to fruit”—a symbol as a generalization of his life in America.

It is worth mentioning that while giving an account of her family saga, Kingston purposefully makes the adventures of her ancestors as representative as possible. For instance, she offers several different versions of her father’s arrival in America, but does not clarify which one is true. By rendering the various ways a man like her father who sought entry into the United States, Kingston extends the parameter of her father’s story to encompass the experiences of diverse China Men. Moreover, the mode of appellation in *China Men* is indicative of the generic character of all Chinese Americans. Each character in the book has his name, his own adventures, but all are referred to more frequently as “the father”, “the legal father”, “the illegal father”, “the father from China”, “the grandfather”, “the brother”. Throughout the book, the several generations of male members merge into the common maleness, and form an archetype of all the Chinese Americans.

Thus Kingston’s excavating the heroic stories of her ancestors from memorial oblivion not only offers an archetype for Chinese American history, but also poses a challenge to the stereotypes. In the then popular American culture, Chinese American was depicted as a castrated or feminized group. Owing to lack of strength and courage, they were incapable of great undertakings, only did humble jobs in laundry and restaurant. Kingston’s vivid account of their heroic feats, unusual courage in constructing America successfully shatters these stereotypes imposed on the Chinese Americans.

B. *Restoring the Masculinity of Chinese Americans*

As introduced earlier, early Chinese men were depicted as coward, submissive and docile pet dogs, devoid of manhood or the traditionally masculine qualities. Jack London once observed, “I was familiar enough with the Chinese character to know that fear alone restrained them” (Yin, 2000, p.73). In essence, these stereotypes are an institutionalized identity invented by the dominant culture to humiliate the Chinese and underscore the prowess and manhood of the westerners. This ideological racism arouses the anger of Kingston. She takes pains to represent her male family members acting against these stereotypes. Thus in *China Men*, we see a gallery of rebellious heroes who are brave enough to counter the white superior in the face of adversity.

The daring and rebellious characteristics of China Men find strong expressions in Bak Goong’s curses against the absurd discriminatory rule in Hawaiian plantation, in father’s venting his hatred for discrimination by writing lines of poetry on the wall of Angel Island (Immigration Station located in San Francisco’s North Bay), and in brother’s remaining a pacifist while enlisted in the military. Kingston’s China Men conscientiously fail to conform to the Occidental standards on Chinese. And above all, their courage, bravery and wisdom are typically presented in the episode of strike when building the railroad.

In building the First Transcontinental Railroad, Chinese workers shouldered the hardest and heaviest task of the project. However, the more unbearable was the extremely discriminating situation. Consistently throughout the construction period, Chinese worked from sunrise to sunset, several hours longer than the working day for white workers with a lower pay. Besides, they had to pay for their own food supplies. To accelerate construction, the white official decided to extend China Men’s work-hour from 8 to 10 by adding 4 dollars a month. Failing in bargaining, Ah Goong and other Chinese workers were determined to launch a strike to fight for their rights at the risk of going to jail. Inspired by a historical precedent that “the time and place for the revolution against Kublai Kan had been hidden inside autumn mooncakes” (p.140), the strikers wrapped the notes of the strike into the traditionally Chinese food Zongzi and distributed among them.

Though the strike ends in compromise, it is of great significance to the Chinese workers. As Henry David Hwang has stated: “...often, coolie laborers have been characterized in America as passive and subservient....The strike is important because it reminds us that in historical fact they were assertive men who stood up for their rights in the face of great adversity” (Chang, 2000, p.44).

While demonstrating Chinese Americans’ courage and prowess, Kingston also makes a lot of efforts to redress the sexual stereotypes imposed by the white race. In American culture of that time, the Chinese American was not a normal man. They were a group with abnormal sexual desires, often portrayed as a “sexless camel” or gay. The popularity of literary Chinese characters, Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan, reinforce the emasculated stereotype of China Men. Fu Manchu, the incarnated genius of the “yellow peril”, is suspected of being gay; Charlie Chan, by contrast, is a womanized humbling detective (Chang, 2000, p.25).

As Tang Ao’s story in the prelude chapter of *China Men* indicates, the first and probably the most painful experience of Chinese men is sexual deprivation once they got to America. 90 percent of early Chinese immigrants were male, and antimiscegenation laws and other laws prohibiting Chinese laborers’ wives from entering the United States forced these immigrants to congregate in a “bachelor society” of Chinatown, unable to father a subsequent generation (Cheung, 1993, p.104).

The pain caused by sexual deprivation is vividly dramatized in a moving episode about Ah Goong. Living a diaspora life for several years and suffering both homesickness and lovesickness, Ah Goong “felt his heart breaking of loneliness” at the thought why “the railroad he was building would not lead him to his family” (p.129). Instead, it ruined

his happy family life. To relieve his painful longing for home, Ah Goong developed a habit of lying under the sky and observing the constellation of the Cowboy and the Spinner (the Altair and the Vega), two stars which reminded him of his wife and homeland far, far apart. And the famous Chinese myth about the two stars—"The Cowboy and the Spinning Girl" (symbolizing the separated lovers who could not meet each other)—always touched the nerve of his emotion. Pretending that a little girl was listening, he told himself the love story about the Cowboy and the Spinning Girl. All his loneliness and lovesickness are inserted in his soliloquizing the legendary story.

However, even in such adversity, Ah Goong managed to demonstrate his masculinity not only physically but also sexually. He exhibited his manliness in cutting a tunnel through the granite mountains. When countering such a million-year-old mountain that "was locked against them and was not to be broken into", Ah Goong said, "A man ought to be made of tougher material than flesh. Skin is too soft. Our bones ought to be filled with iron." He thought he "had to slam with strength and will....He learned to slide his hand up the handle, lift, slide and swing, circular motion, hamming, hammering, hammering....He hit at the same spot over and over again" (p.134). Kingston's portrayal of Ah Goong may be interpreted as a western mythic figure with admirable strength and vigor. With his hammer, he counters against literally the granite and metaphorically the stiff discriminatory laws that exclude them. Besides displaying Ah Goong's physical strength, Kingston's descriptions here also involve sexual implication. According to Sigmund Freud, every concave image, such as a cup, cave, vase is a female symbol, and any image whose length exceeds its diameter, such as a tower, sword, knife or pen becomes a phallic or male symbol (Bressler, 1994, p.162). Thus applying Freud's theory into the case, we can interpret Ah Goong's hammer as a male symbol, the tunnel that he cut as a female symbol, and his swinging hammer in the tunnel symbolizing the sexual intercourse. Through his hammer, Ah Goong sexualized and feminized the American land, and put it into his possession in imagination.

The above assumption that Ah Goong's conquering the land is metaphorically an act of mating the land, which in his vision is a virgin, is further confirmed by his other more daring act. When Ah Goong's sexual longing intensified with time, "He took out his penis under his blanket or bared it in the woods and thought about nurses and princesses. He also just looked at it, wondering what it was for, what a man was for what he had to have a penis for" (p.144). The emasculation and sexual discrimination from the white discourse did not thwart Ah Goong's faith in his sexuality. To defeat the feminization and castration project, which aims to suffocate the Chinese men, he began showing his masculinity in a defiant way: "One beautiful day dangling in the sun above a new valley, not the desire to urine but sexual desire clutched him so hard that 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" (p.133). By treating the sexuality of Chinese Americans with irony and humor, Kingston successfully shatters the stereotypes of the effeminate Chinese men and recuperates their sexual prowess. In addition to sexuality, this humorous ejaculatory act of Ah Goong also demonstrates Chinese Americans' resilient and indomitable spirits to survive under the adverse conditions. As Cheung acknowledges, "Ah Goong's defiant act of impregnating the world underscores both the insufferable deprivation of China Men and their strategies of survival through grandiose imagination" (Cheung, 1993, p.104).

C. *Breaking Silence*

The historical experience of the Chinese in the United States is largely a history of prejudice and discrimination. Ever since their emigration to the United States, Chinese Americans have faced serious racial discrimination. Anti-Chinese prejudice, economic and social repression have never ceased throughout the history of Chinese immigration to America. All these discriminatory restrictions aim at disfranchising and silencing Chinese Americans, depriving their voice before driving them out of America. Just as the editors of *Asian Writers* put it in discourse, "The minority's reaction to racist policy is acceptance and apparent satisfaction. One measure of the success of white racism is the silence of the minority race and the amount of white energy to maintain or increase that silence...." (Chin, et al. 1974, p. XXV-XX VI).

To survive the hostility, Chinese Americans had no choice except for silence. They had to watch every step in case the white racists would take advantage of their "wrong-doings". Therefore, silence had been a part of the price that Chinese Americans had to pay to survive in a country that hated them, particularly those who entered the country under false or "paper" names. Suffering this long-standing imposed silence, Chinese Americans were deprived of language to express themselves. Their voices were suppressed, their contribution to America was erased. They became "linguistic orphan" (Frank Chin's word). However, to remain silent is to risk erasure. The inability to assert oneself, to tell one's story is to adopt a position of weakness and passivity. Just as Karl Marx said, "They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented" (Said, 1978, epigraph). Language is an instrument used by western cultural imperialism to exclude or marginalize minority groups. Language also plays an important role in establishing one's identity in a society. So, for the minority writers like Kingston, the appeal to language to break silence is a fundamental step to fight against the inferiority that is imposed upon his or her community.

Therefore, silence-breaking is a recurrent theme in *China Men*. *China Men* is composed to challenge her father, a man whose habitual reticence is punctuated with misogynist curses, a man with "no history, no past, no China" (p.14): "I will tell you what I suppose from your silences and few words, and your can tell me that I'm mistaken. You'll just have to speak up with the real stories if I've got you wrong"(p.15). And through decoding her father's silence, Kingston

turns the silenced history of her heroic ancestors into a collective Chinese American epic. If we say that *The Woman Warrior* concerns with the young narrator's growing up from wordlessness to eloquence by breaking the silence imposed by both racism and sexism, we find in *China Men* the mature narrator begins to rupture the silence in which her ancestors have been enveloped for nearly a century. Besides Kingston herself as a silence breaker, we see that Kingston purposefully underscores her ancestors' ability and efforts to utter their voices throughout the book. So, like *The Woman Warrior*, *China Men*, is rich in heroic images of individuals who strenuously find their voice, and recover their ability to vocalize stories, among whom Bak Goong is a typical representative.

The great grandfather is gifted with language. Therefore, the rule that the Chinese laborers were not allowed to speak while working on the plantation is so absurd and annoying to him: "I wasn't born to be silent like a monk....If I know I had to take a vow of silence, I would have shaved off my hair and become a monk" (p.100). Bak Goong here related the deprivation of language to sexual castration. He "withstood the hours, did the work well, but the rule of silence wrought him up whenever a demon rode by. He suddenly had all kinds of things to say" (p.100). Bak Goong attempted to resist the imposed rule the day he arrived on the plantation. He first tried to convert talk into a song, "Work. Work. Work. Eat. Eat. Eat. Shit and Piss" (p.100), so as to break their monotonous mode of life, but was whipped. Then when he complained to the paymaster demon that the pay was "too little", he was fined (p.102). Bak Goong's anger was as fierce as the fire they set on trees, and he did not give up. Finally he learned to let out his curses disguised as coughs. When the demons howled to work faster, he coughed in reply, "Get-that-horse-dust-away-from-me-you-dead-white-demon. Don't-stare-at-me-with-those-glass-eyes. I-can't-take-this-life"(p.102). The deep long coughs, barking and wheezing were almost as satisfying as shouting. He felt better after having his say. Since then, Bak Goong became a talk addict. He told stories to make the work easier. He even adapted a folk tale to make fun of the missionary ladies. Eventually when all the men fell ill, lying in bed, he diagnosed their illness: "Uncles and brothers, I have diagnosed our illness. It is a congestion from not talking, what we have to do is talk and talk" (p.115). Bak Goong then told his fellow workmates an ancient folk story which concerned a king with a secret—his son has cat's ears. Years went by, and when the king could not contain his secret any more, he scooped out a hole and shouted into it, "The king's son has cat ears. The king's son has cat ears". The king felt relieved after shouting his secrets into the hole and burying it. Inspired by the story, the next day, instead of plowing straight furrows at work, the men dug a hole in a circle, then threw down their tools and plopped on the ground with their faces over the edge of the hole and their legs like wheel spokes. Suddenly all their hidden, repressed emotions and unspoken wishes rushed out like flood into the "ear of the world" which is "literally a receptacle for the muffled voices of *China Men* and figuratively an orifice for their pent-up sexual desire"(Cheung, 1993,109): "'Hello down there in China.' 'Hello, mother.' 'Hello, my heart and my liver. I miss you.' 'I've been working for you, and I hate it.' 'Sometimes I forget my family and go to clubs. I drink all night.' 'I've coming home by and by.' 'I want to be home.' Bak Goong shouted, 'I want home.' 'I want my home.' The others follow him, yelling, 'I want home. Home. Home. Home. Home'" (p.117).

Far from docile and willing slaves, these men here were assertive, bold, and threatening. And the shout party is so effective that it not only cures Chinese men's congestion, but also intimidates the white demons to such an extent that "in cutting season, the demons no longer accompanied the knife-wielding *China Men* into deep cane"(p.118). From that day on, Bak Goong talked and sang at his work, never being afraid of fine and whip.

Talked out, the men buried their words, and planted them. Kingston thus writes poetically, "Soon the new green shoots would rise, and when in two years the cane grew gold tassels, what stories the wind would tell" (p.118). The author indicates here just as the wind blowing through the grass over the spot where the king had planted his secrets spread the news throughout the land the next year, the wind blowing through the sugar cane will eventually carry the stories of *China Men* and make it known throughout the world. Quite purposefully, several decades later, Kingston, a brave silence breaker as well as a willing listener, went to the land of men to listen to the stories told by wind, and sung by the islands, then wrote the book. As Fa Mulan successfully entered the men's world of battle and revenged her family with sword, Kingston gets into this men's land and creates this men's work which effectively dispels the wrongs that the white autocracy has committed against her ancestors, realizing what she has said, "the reporting is the vengeance" (*The Woman Warrior*, p.54).

The assertiveness of Chinese Americans also demonstrates in Ah Goong's shouting out his disdain into the Sierra Nevada sky, in father's muttering imprecations at the ironing table, in brother's solemn self-defense that he was an American when suspected by one official in the army. And these various voices become the bearers of history, self-hood, and identity, for as these marginalized fathers and brothers move from silence to voice, from wordlessness to eloquence, they begin to recover themselves and develop their Chinese American cultural identity.

While appreciating these ancestors' defiant act of breaking silence, we cannot neglect the fact that Kingston's writing of *China Men* is another brave way of breaking silence in her own terms. During her childhood, Kingston suffered from a prolonged period of muteness. This keenly felt pain of being silenced makes her realize the importance of gaining a voice: "If you don't talk, you can't have a personality" (*The Woman Warrior*, p.53). Thus the silenced situation of her ancestors fires the author with anger. As she understands, being silenced, whether self-imposed or externally imposed, is to be stifled as a human being and erased from history. She feels obligated to retrieve the voices for these silenced forefathers, and counter the erasure of Chinese American history from mainstream American history.

Kingston consciously does many efforts to search for the voices of her ancestors. She went to Hawaii and stood

alongside the highway at the edge of the sugarcane and listened to the voices of the great-grandfathers; she took a transcontinental train and past the Sierra Nevada Mountains to find the message left by the grandfathers; she visited her uncles and relatives to listen to their stories. With her persistent efforts, Kingston does give voice to these silenced forefathers in this book. Compared with her forefathers' voice which was forced into a hole and waited to be unearthed, Kingston's voice is resonant and effective as manifested in Alfred S. Wang's comment that "the history of Chinese male in America has not been dealt with honestly or profoundly in literature until the publication of Kingston's *China Men*" (Wu, 1991, p. 95). While Ah Goong had to masturbate and "squirited out into space" of Sierra Nevada valley, Kingston is "fertilizing the world with words" (Ling, 1997, p. 324). Inheriting her father's poetic temperament which her father lost in his laundry, she becomes a Chinese American Ts'ai Yen and "a Fu Mu Lan of the pen instead of the sword" (Goellnicht, 1992, p. 203), tearing into shreds the American grand narrative in her radical way of rewriting history.

III. CONCLUSION

In the preceding parts, this paper explores how Kingston reconstructs Chinese American history through the main strategy of counter-memory—talk-story. Kingston's task to retrieve the past is not an easy one since time is irrevocable, and man is cut off from the past. There is no means for man to return to his past. Instead, the past can be reclaimed through memory, story, imagination, archival works, legend and myth. So Kingston's chief strategy to reconstruct the past is to retell the story of the male immigrants in her family and turn it into an archetypal history of all Chinese Americans. Depicting her male forefathers' immigration stories as a transgenerational epic, Kingston focuses her epic narrative on her forebears' adventures in cultivating the Hawaii plantation, building the First Transcontinental Railroad, serving in the American army and sweating in the laundry and restaurant. By highlighting their heroic feats, their manhood, their rebellious acts, their intellectual ingenuity and spiritual endurance, their achievements against enormous odds and requiring great physical strengths, Kingston reconstructs the heroic past of Chinese Americans which counters the stereotypes of the Chinese as coward, passive, submissive, feminine, and unfolds an oppositional voice to official American history in which her forefathers were distortedly represented or totally effaced.

Also Kingston stresses the importance of silence-breaking, and deems the loss of language as an important factor of *China Men*'s loss of manhood, history and identity. Thus in *China Men*, Kingston takes pain to rehabilitate their ability to utter voices, and depicts a series of heroes who courageously ruptured the imposed silence even with mumbles, curses and coughs, and unremittingly claimed their rights to vocalize stories when facing the danger of being disfranchised and erased. As Linda Ching Sledge commented, "Kingston's greatest achievement in *China Men* is her transmogrification of her forebears' language into a heroic tongue" (Sledge, 1990, p. 308).

Thus by interweaving personal and national events, fantasy and facts, talk-story and myth, Kingston presents another version of Chinese American history to expose the bigotry of history monopolized by the dominant American culture. Kingston's version does not intend to finalize the truth of history, but to exhibit the various aspects of history, so that it can demystify the authority of monologic history, and carve a place for Chinese Americans in American history.

However, Kingston's writing is not merely a process of confrontation, subversion. It is also a process of discovery and creation of cultural identity. Her efforts in *China Men* is not just to claim America for her silenced forefathers, but to envision a bright future for young generations of Chinese Americans. In one of her interviews concerning the relationship between history-writing and identity formation, Kingston stated, "Understanding the past changes the present, and the ever-evolving present changes the significance of the past" (Rabinowitz, 1990, p. 316). Kingston here means that re-reading history and establishing identity are interactive. She hopes that young generations, in search of their identity, trace back to their past. Only by knowing their history and realizing the value embodied in it can they establish their full identity as ethnic minority and hold their future in their hands in multicultural America.

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