The “Sent-Down Body” Remembers:
Contemporary Chinese Immigrant Women’s Visual and Literary Narratives

Dissertation

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Abstract

In this dissertation, I use contemporary Chinese immigrant women’s visual and literary narratives to examine gender, race, ethnicity, migration, immigration, and sexual experiences in various power discourses from a transnational perspective. In particular, I focus on the relationship between body memories and history, culture, migration and immigration portrayed in these works. I develop and define “the sent-down body,” a term that describes educated Chinese urban youths (also called sent-down youths in many studies) working in the countryside during the Chinese Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The “sent-down body” in this context and in my analysis is the politicized and sexualized migrant body. The term also describes previous sent-down youths’ immigration experiences in the United States, because many of them became immigrants in the post-Cultural Revolution era and are usually described as “overseas sent-down youths” (yangchadui). Therefore, the “sent-down body” is also the immigrant body, and it is racialized. Moreover, the “sent-down body” is gendered, but I study the female “sent-down body” and its represented experiences in specific political, historical, cultural, and sexual contexts. By using “the sent-down body” as an organizing concept in my dissertation, I introduce a new category of analysis in studies of Chinese immigrants’ history and culture. I use the term “the sent-down body” to explore a new terrain to study representations of historical, cultural, and political experiences in the context of body memories and coerced or voluntary human movement in physical or symbolic locations.
The focus on Chinese immigrant women’s cultural production also helps enrich studies of new Chinese immigrants’ experiences by treating them as part of Asian American immigrants’ experiences.
Dedication

For my parents Li Zhifang & Li Fulong
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# Table of Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................................ ii

Dedication ....................................................................................................................... iv

Acknowledgments .......................................................................................................... v

Vita .................................................................................................................................. viii

Introduction .................................................................................................................... 1

Part I

Chapter 1: The Abused and Traumatized Sent-down Body in Transnational Cinema .... 35

Chapter 2: The Condemned and Transgressive Sent-Down Body in Memoir ............... 86

Part II

Chapter 3: Transnational Sexual Space: The Sent-Down Body in Short Stories

and Poetry ....................................................................................................................... 139

Chapter 4: The Sexualized and Racialized Sent-Down Body in Self-Portraits .......... 190

Conclusion ..................................................................................................................... 232

References ..................................................................................................................... 236
Introduction

The focus of this project is the literature, film, and artwork of a group of Chinese immigrant women who experienced the Cultural Revolution in China (1966-1976) and whose representations of that experience resonate in their texts. My entry to their work is the concept of body memory, which emphasizes the importance of the body as the site of memory, trauma, and shifts in identity and culture. By asking “How does the body remember?” and “What types of body practice remembering?,” I address a special type of the Chinese body that experienced and survived the Chinese Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and moved to the United States afterwards. I use this body to argue that the Chinese body is a repository of remembering, and that body memories and history, culture, migration and immigration are reciprocal components of remembering historical and cultural experiences in various power discourses. I also use this body to explore a new terrain to study the relationships between body memories and coerced or voluntary human movement in physical or symbolic locations.

Body memory is not strictly about the process of remembering (internal memory); it is about inscription that focuses on the physicality of memory as well (external memory). Christian Steineck believes that memory is also physically present and the body is a medium of memory. For him, “The body as a whole is both involved in the building of history, and influenced by it” (43), and “the human body serves as a medium
that communicates past experiences, actions, and emotions into the present. . . In other words, the body serves as a symbol, but as a living symbol, one that contributes to the meaning communicated through it” (49). Steineck, while recognizing the importance of remembering, inserts the role the human body plays in remembering. The way he connects memory with the human body provides a basis of analysis in my project.

This special type of the Chinese body in my project is “the sent-down body” constructed in contemporary Chinese immigrant women’s visual and literary narratives, which mediates memory and historical and cultural experiences. It is the migrant and the immigrant body, and is historical, political, and cultural in meaning. It is a term describing educated Chinese urban youths (also called sent-down youths in many studies), who were sent to the countryside or collective farms for re-education during the Cultural Revolution but many were able to move to the United States in the post-Mao era (1976-). The women writers and artists I analyze in the project had the experiences described above and have weaved them into their visual and literary works. They have been doubly displaced, first in China and then to the United States. Attention to their representations of their recent past in relation to their immigration experience, both of which are inscribed upon “the sent-down body,” is particularly relevant in studying contemporary Chinese immigrant women’s identities. It not only provides a new lens of analysis of Chinese American immigration but also stresses the significance of interdisciplinary research on representations of gender, migration, and immigration. It enables us to position recent Chinese immigrant women in a transnational, transcultural,
and transhistorical context of spatial and temporal movement and examine their identities from multiple locations and in various power discourses.

President Lyndon Johnson’s Immigrant Act of 1965 and the end of the Chinese Cultural Revolution enabled more Chinese people from mainland China to move to the United States. This has helped change the demographic structure of Chinese Americans and has complicated meanings of contemporary Chinese American immigration. I use contemporary Chinese immigrant women’s works and the sent-down body collectively constructed in these works as a window into my inquiry of these meanings. I also aim to provide non-Chinese audiences and readers with a critical lens to understand not only contemporary Chinese political and cultural history, but also these immigrant women’s efforts to define who they are as new immigrants.

In this project, I particularly draw on theories of body memories suggested by Edward Casey and Paul Connerton, Michel Foucault’s discussions of disciplined, punished, and docile bodies, and feminist theories of the gendered body to discuss the relationship between the sent-down body and memories of historical and cultural experiences. It is not my aim to study the process of remembering or the process of historical reconstruction. Instead, I treat the sent-down body as a critical site for remembering Chinese immigrant women’s journeys from the past to the present and as a discourse in which power relations represented through the sent-down body’s movement in China.

In my project, I argue that the sent-down body is gendered. Both male and female sent-down youths were physically uprooted and relocated under political and social
coercion and experienced physical and mental ordeal during the Cultural Revolution. Nevertheless, my focus in the project is the female sent-down body that is physically relocated and represented in visual and literary narratives. I also use the docile, disciplined, transgressive, and transnational body to analyze different spectra of the sent-down body. I treat the sent-down body not only as an object of knowledge but also as an object that is historically and culturally shaped in complex narrative forms. I focus on three types of the female sent-down body: 1) the abused and traumatized sent-down body in transnational cinema; 2) the condemned or transgressive sent-down body in memoir; and 3) the transnational sent-down body in self-portraits, short stories and poetry. The first two types of the sent-down body are linked to female sent-down youths’ internal migration experiences during the Cultural Revolution while the third is about the female sent-down youths’ immigration and their cross-cultural experiences described in contemporary Chinese immigrant women’s literary works and art.

Using the female experience as a lens for analysis, I propose that the Chinese female sent-down body is important to the field of women’s studies in many domains (transnational feminism, gender, im/migration and history, feminist ethnic studies, or sexuality studies). I also propose that a focus on experiences of the Chinese female sent-down body helps us to understand the relationship between representation and transnational feminism in the discussion of gender in migration and immigration. With this project, I speak to conventional feminist body politics and expand it to study contemporary Chinese immigrant women’s historical, migration and immigration
experiences represented in their visual and literary texts. I hope to make Chinese immigrant women’s experiences more relevant in current studies of body memories.

**The Cultural Revolution as Embodied History**

The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution initiated by Mao Zedong (1893-1976) was a major political and mass movement after P. R. China was founded in 1949. Mao intended to purge bourgeois ideologies supposedly existing in intellectuals’ minds and called on educated youths to challenge the Communist Party officials and Chinese intellectuals. It affected Chinese people’s lives tremendously. Millions of educated urban youths were relocated to villages and farms during this period.¹ Many intellectuals and party officials were sent to labor camps or denounced. The Communist Party announced in 1981 that the movement was mistakenly initiated and caused a decade of chaos in China.

We cannot study the Cultural Revolution without examining Chinese people’s bodily experiences. Drawing on studies by Lü (1994), Joseph Esherick and his colleagues (2006), and Yang Su (2006), I argue that the Cultural Revolution is embodied history, as it entailed severe corporeal punishment or bodily sacrifice from the very beginning. Esherick and his colleagues mention that violence, torture, and murder were rampant at that time. Factional conflicts and bloodshed battles were everywhere, in factories, schools, universities and village, and organized killings were very common in

¹ Strictly speaking, educated urban youths started to move to the countryside in 1955, when the Chinese government aimed to solve eminent employment problems in urban areas and facilitate agricultural development. For detailed information, refer to Du Honglin’s book project on the history of Chinese sent down youths.
rural areas. It was also common to see elites or other so-called class enemies humiliated and denounced in the public, with their arms tied and hair cut as yinyang hair (half of the head was shaven off). Some committed suicide because of the humiliation and torture. Lü suggests in “A Step Toward Understanding Popular Violence in China’s Cultural Revolution” that “Responding to Mao Zedong’s call for ‘Sweeping Away All Monsters and Demons’, the campaign of ‘Destroying the Four Olds (posijiu, i.e., old ideas, cultures, customs, and habits) raised the curtain on the CR mass violence” (534). Those who were considered class enemies

were criticized and denounced at public meetings and paraded in the streets bearing humiliating labels. Their hair was cut into various extreme styles by the Red Guards to humiliate them. They were beaten and tortured, and were forced to do physical work. Many were killed by abuse and violence. . . . many people resorted to suicide to avoid the torture and killing. (533, 534)

Meanwhile, some sent-down youths died in factional fights (Du 1993), while many others died “heroic deaths” when working in the countryside, believing that they sacrificed their lives for the right cause -- Communism. Many former sent-down youths tell stories of sacrifice and deaths (Du 1993; CYP 1990; Liu 2004). In An Oral History of Sent-Down Youths (2004), Liu Xiaomeng interviews Xiao Yue who told him about losing her female friends who died when trying to control unexpected fires on a farm on Oct. 19, 1969. Another example is from Bei Da Huang Feng Yun Lu (1990) published by China Youth Press. One story tells that on Nov. 7, 1970, fourteen sent-down youths died when they tried to control a forest fire on a northeastern farm (105). In the same book, there are other similar stories. These are only a few out of many such examples. They
demonstrate that sent-down youths committed their lives to a sacred revolutionary cause and never hesitated to sacrifice them when needed.

Violence against sent-down youths was also popular during the Cultural Revolution. According to Du Honglin’s study, some youths “were abused, paralyzed and died,” and some female sent-down youths “were raped or harassed” sexually (41, 211). He argues, “there is not an exact estimate of sexual abuses cases among 8,000,000 female sent-down youths, but there are overwhelming stories told by sent-down youths” (217).

In sum, Chinese individuals’ bodily experiences permeate every aspect of the Cultural Revolution and should not be dismissed in studies of contemporary Chinese political and social history. Contemporary Chinese immigrant women’s lives are heavily informed and shaped by the bodily experience during the Cultural Revolution. Many of them were physically uprooted and relocated to the countryside at that time. Unlike many of their peers who disappeared without a trace, they have lived to tell their stories in addition to their own stories, but in representational forms of literature, films, and art. The bodily experience in these works is not only represented in narrative forms but also was a physical reality for these women writers and artists. Their works cover different aspects of the bodily experience in the context of power relations, and open a space to reconstruct the Cultural Revolution as embodied history and make the sent-down body more meaningful in the study of contemporary Chinese history. On the one hand, the body in these works is not the object of the text but the subject of experience. It is a body recuperated by former sent-down youths, even though it was disciplined and invisible during the Cultural Revolution. On the other hand, a focus also expands the scope of the
sent-down body to cover not only the internal migrant experiences but also sent-down youths’ immigration experiences in, for instance, the United States.

**Societies Remember through the Gendered Body**

My focus on the Chinese female sent-down body is motivated by my wish to discuss what narrative forms and narratives contemporary Chinese immigrant women writers and artists use to respond to body politics and its role in constructing historical and cultural meanings. To organize my dissertation, I adopt theories of body memory particularly delineated in works by Edward Casey and Paul Connerton in addition to Michel Foucault’s theory of disciplined and punished bodies. I also include gender in memory studies by drawing on studies by Janice Haaken and J. Edward Mallot. I use major concepts developed by these theorists and scholars: traumatized body memory, eroticized body memory, and docile and condemned bodies in various power relations. I also propose that the Chinese female sent-down body connects historical and cultural memories in a transnational context of the body in motion.

Traditional memory studies position the mind at the center of remembering traumas and the past. Scholar of philosophical psychology and theory of psychoanalysis Edward Casey and social anthropologist Paul Connerton, however, are two contemporary theorists of memory studies who argue that the body also remembers. In *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study* (1987) Casey argues that prior experiences and body memory are inseparable from each other. He distinguishes three types of body memory: habitual body memories, traumatic body memories, and erotic body memories. Habitual body
memories remember “the past [as] embodied in actions” and concern “the body as a coordinated whole” (153, 155). Traumatic body memories remember pains and range from “those that are strictly psychical in status . . . to those that are thoroughly interpersonal” (154). Erotic memories are memories of bodily pleasures. For him, “The body retains memories of pleasures as well as of pains” because “we remember many pleasures in and through our bodies” (157). Casey also cautions that traumatic or erotic body memories are not to replicate original pains or pleasures. At any rate, “body memory is important in human experience” and “there is no memory without body memory” (Casey 172 italicized by author). Casey’s arguments suggest that pains and pleasures are both inseparable from body memory. Therefore, studies of historical, political, and cultural experiences, if focusing on body memory, should take both bodily pains and pleasures into account.²

Connerton approaches studies of memory from a non-psychological perspective. In How Society Remembers (1989), he concurs with Casey on the existence of body memories, but emphasizes the link between social memories and bodily practices. He asks an essential question, “how is the memory of groups conveyed and sustained” (1). He distinguishes three types of memories: personal memories that are studied mainly by psychoanalysts as an investigation of individuals’ life history; cognitive memories that psychologists study in order to investigate inherent cognitive powers of the mind; and the social habit-memory that is embedded in bodily practices. For him, social memories are largely body memories conveyed through bodily practices, which are a part of social

² But this does not mean that bodily pains and pleasures are contained in each other and should always be examined in relation to each other.
habit-memory. He argues that social habit-memory is overshadowed by studies of the other two types of memories, and needs more attention. He suggests that social habit-memory is closely related to the human body, because the body, like the mind, harbors memories of one generation or generations in bodily practices such as clothing and behavior, and “the memories of one generation locked irretrievably . . . in the brains and bodies of that generation” (3). By introducing the body into memory studies, Casey and Connerton move beyond a purely psychoanalytical focus on the memory and bring historical, social, political, and cultural aspects of memory into memory studies.

Arguing in line with Casey and Connerton, historian and philosopher Foucault also emphasizes the political and historical aspects of the human body. He states that the body is a politically inscribed entity and is marked by histories and practices of control. In his words, the body is produced through and in history, and should be the focus of culture and history accordingly. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault explains that “the body is manipulated, shaped, trained” but “may be transformed and improved” (136). He also suggests that the human body is positioned in a power discourse, in which “a machinery of power . . . explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it” through disciplinary methods like administrative and economic techniques of control (138). Although the body in Foucault’s studies is not treated as capable of remembering, it aligns with a focus on the body that contains history and culture, which is proposed by Casey and Connerton. In addition, “docile bodies” and “condemned and disciplined bodies” in Foucault’s studies are also among the key concepts that help analyze the Chinese female sent-down body and its relations to Chinese political history and culture.
Therefore, my project uses Casey, Connerton, and Foucault and their emphasis on the body as my focal theoretical or conceptual frame. I am interested in inscribed and re-inscribed meanings of history and culture upon the traumatized, eroticized, and condemned female sent-down body in contemporary Chinese immigrant women’s visual and literary narratives.

Gender, however, is not a focus in studies by Casey, Connerton, and Foucault even though the human body and its experience are always gendered. Casey and Foucault leave out gender completely. Even though Connerton admits gender difference in incorporating postural behavior when discussing bodily practices in social memories, he does not pursue his discussions further. Therefore, it is necessary to introduce feminist attention to gender and the body memory.

Feminist social psychologist Janice Haaken provides a thorough study of the relationship between gender and remembering in Pillar of Salt (1998). Her special interest in this book is the psychological and cultural process of memory in sexual abuse narratives. She argues:

The act of remembering -- of looking back -- can feel transgressive . . . As both a treacherous and a liberator activity, confronting the personal past involves reconciling competing allegiances and conflicting desires. . . . For women, particularly, the process of remembering -- both individually and collectively -- means creating representations of the past out of a shadowy historical landscape. (1)

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3 In Haaken’s study, remembering and memory are two different categories. Remembering involves “the motivational and active dimensions of mind” (14).
She also suggests, “Remembering itself is a gendered activity” (12). By connecting gender with psychology, therefore, Haaken brings gendered memory into memory studies.

J. Edward Mallot, drawing on Foucault and Haaken, also proposes that history, culture, and the body are reciprocally inscribed on one another. He argues in “Body Politics and the Body Politic” (2006) that memory is the human inscription upon the body. In his view, “the body can retain and reveal an individual’s past,” and “also serves as an intentional instrument of individual agency” for characters to “write memories with and on their corporeal selves to cope with psychologically oriented crises” (165-166). He further argues, “What a body remembers may hold important clues for . . . how history and narrative might be reconsidered” (166). Mallot’s article also links gender with body memory in postcolonial literary analysis. He applies theories of body memory to Shauna Singh Baldwin’s novel What the Body Remembers (1999) and its main female characters. He concurs with theorists and scholars of memory studies that the body remembers, but also notes that memory is a gendered activity, particularly in writings of women in India about communal violence against women. By tying gender and body memory together, Mallot points to the phenomenon that body memory is inseparable from many women’s experiences.

My project is not psychoanalytic in nature, but it is informed by some major concepts and theories in memory studies. I mean to use body memories to analyze how contemporary Chinese immigrant women use the female sent-down body to reflect on historical and cultural meanings of growing up in the Mao era and afterwards. Although
contemporary Chinese immigrant women have published many narratives about the Cultural Revolution and other historical and cultural experiences, the four artists and authors I study in the project stand out from among their peers with their explicit emphasis on the female sent-down body, particularly the sent-down body in their narratives. The body memory discussed in my project, as discussed earlier, is a memory of political and cultural history impressed upon the female body or migration and immigration in P. R. China and the United States.

**Sent-Down Youths, Rusticated Youths and Zhiqing**

There are a few different terms describing Chinese educated youths during the Cultural Revolution. Educated urban youths who went to the countryside or farms are called “sent-down youths” in many studies. Because the term “sent-down youth” has specific connotations, it is important to understand its contexts and some other terms associated with these educated youths. My project uses the term “sent-down youths” to describe these young people, who participated in the relocation program “up to the mountains, down to the countryside” (shangshanxiaxiang) and worked in villages or on farms between 1966 and 1976. Sent-down youths, rusticated youths, and zhiqing have their origins in the term zhishiqingnian (知识青年), meaning youths who have knowledge or are educated youths. Although Mao Zedong first used the term zhishiqingnian in 1919, it “referred to young people who had some education and was used to distinguish those youths from illiterate common people” at that time (Cao 1). In
current studies, it refers to a particular group of educated youths during the Cultural Revolution.\textsuperscript{4}

Together with “sent-down youths” or rusticated youths, “the sent-down body” particularly describes those who finished middle-school or high-school education, and had re-education (the rustication movement) in villages or on farms in the Mao era. The three terms are interchangeable in many studies of educated youths during the Cultural Revolution. The term “sent-down youths” appears in studies, for instance, by Peter J. Seybolt and Thomas Bernstein. Although Seybolt’s book title is \textit{The Rustication of Urban Youth in China} (1975), he uses “sent-down youths” to describe youths growing up in cities and having little contact with village society (xii). Bernstein’s book \textit{Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages} (1977) is considered as the first comprehensive study of the sent-down movement. He uses “sent-down youths” to emphasize “down to the village,” translated directly from \textit{xia (down) xiang (the village)} in Chinese. Seybolt and Bernstein also simply use “UYs” to refer to urban youths in their studies.

Chinese American historian Yihong (2002) Pan uses the term “rusticated youths” (\textit{zhiqing}) in her studies. As a former sent-down youth, Pan points out that rusticated youths are those “urban and rural middle school graduates who settle as peasants in the countryside” (1). Her use of “rusticated youths” is broader in meaning. They include both urban and rural educated youths. While urban youths were sent down to the countryside or the farm and returned to their home cities in a few years, rural educated

\footnote{Chinese names usually put last name before first name, but overseas Chinese either follow the Chinese tradition or adopt the Western use of names. In my project, Chinese names are used in line with their appearance in publications.}
youths returned to their own villages after middle or high school to be peasants and rarely left for big cities.

Zuoya Cao, a former sent-down youth as well, also uses “rusticated youth” in her book title *Out of the Crucible: Literary Works about the Rusticated Youth* (2003), but she chooses to use *zhiqing* throughout the book. She defines *zhiqing* as “a special stratum of Chinese urban youth who were dispatched to reside in rural areas to live the peasant way of life during the second phase of the Cultural Revolution (1968-1977)” (1). Stanley Rosen (1981), on the other hand, uses “*shangshan xiaxiang qingnian*, sent-down youth, educated youth, rusticated youth, urban youth, or simply UY” to describe “sent-down urban-educated youths” (1) in his study of sent-down youths’ role in the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

In my project, I use “sent-down youths” to be consistent with the term “the sent-down body” I developed and define in relation to these youths’ experiences, unless the term appears otherwise in direct quotes. I do not discuss educated youths from rural areas. I examine educated urban youths who were relocated to villages or farms during the Cultural Revolution. On the one hand, the direct translation of *xiaxiang* (down to villages) best describes the youths who were part of the relocation program, because it indicates movement from relatively affluent areas to underdeveloped villages. The term *shangshan* (up to the mountains) is also part of sent-down youths’ experiences, but it is not usually used to describe these youths.

As demonstrated, the sent-down body derives from the term sent-down youths and reflects both historical and immigration experiences reconstructed through body
memories in Chinese immigrant women’s visual and literary texts. In the post-Mao era, many former sent-down youths and other educated youths have been able to move overseas as students or immigrants. Oftentimes, they call themselves as “yangchadui” (overseas sent-down youths) to indicate continuation of their migration and relocation. Unlike their previous migration that was primarily involuntary, the new sent-down experience is generally voluntary relocation. Therefore, the sent-down body in my project refers to both sent-down youths’ forced movement to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution and their voluntary movement to foreign countries as students or immigrants.

**Theorizing the Sent-Down Body**

The “sent-down body” used in my project refers to two major categories of the body in motion – migration and immigration. It is first the migrant body, which is politicized and sexualized. It is also the immigrant body that is sexualized and racialized. Moreover, the “sent-down body” is gendered, because both male and female bodies are subjects, and could be analyzed this way. However, my project uses the female “sent-down body” as a case study, and focuses on its experiences in specific political, historical, cultural, and sexual contexts.

Female sent-down youths’ experiences are critical for us to analyze contemporary Chinese political and cultural history because many of them are victims of a sexual discourse during the Cultural Revolution. It is also abused or traumatized, condemned and disciplined, and transgressive. In the post-Cultural Revolution era, many female
sent-down youths immigrated to the United States and produced artistic and literary works about their experiences. The female sent-down body, therefore, has a new type of sent-down experience. It connects two worlds and reflects female sent-down youths’ new lives as immigrants in some of these works. In this sense, the female sent-down body is also transnational and transcultural. Even though some other overseas sent-down youths in France, the United Kingdom, and Canada have produced films or published literary works of sent-down experiences, they have not formed a community like Chinese immigrants in the United States to construct a collective memory of histories. This, however, does not mean that their works are insignificant. While there is a need to include them in studying overseas Chinese memories the Cultural Revolution, my project uses Chinese immigrant women’s works as a case study.

Although there is a rich literature on publications by and about previous sent-down youths, “the sent-down body” is a term not found or defined in current studies of contemporary Chinese immigrant women’s works. Non-Chinese readers and audience depend on previous sent-down youths’ visual and literary narratives to make sense of what is not a part of their own experiences and lives, hoping to reconstruct or project a history that is not theirs. Therefore, they read these narratives as representing history rather than constructed memories of embodied histories such as the Cultural Revolution.

Contemporary Chinese political and cultural history and Chinese American immigration history are both closely related to the sent-down body that reflects some unique experiences that only a generation of educated urban youths shared in the Mao era. It also characterizes many of these youths’ post-Mao experiences. A focus on the
sent-down body helps us understand how history, politics, and culture are represented in works by contemporary Chinese immigrants.

The sent-down body is specifically related to female sent-down youths’ experiences during the Cultural Revolution and upon immigration. Although it is a concept that helps understand these youths’ involuntary or voluntary migration and immigration, it also demonstrates its physicality and physical movement from the city to the countryside and from China to the United States. Therefore, the sent-down body in Chinese immigrants’ visual and literary narratives is a concept embedded in physicality. In these works, the authors and artists reconstruct, for instance, sent-down youths’ relocation, encounter of violence, moments of sexual awakening, or exploration of female desires. Violence and forced sexual activities were part of many female sent-down youths’ lives in villages or on farms. As a result, tragedies such as death or insanity are invisible and silenced. In addition, the sent-down body in these narratives is not only punished but also transgressive in a way that challenges heterosexual norms. The state censorship limited many sent-down youths’ pursuit of romance and love relationships. Punishment was inflicted upon those who failed to practice self-discipline, and those who resisted the government expectations are considered transgressive bodies in my project. Finally, the sent-down body in these texts is diasporic in the post-Mao era, as it assumes new meanings in many sent-down youths’ transnational migration. The sent-down body then spans two continents and is redefined in relation to contemporary Chinese history and politics and post-1965 Chinese American immigration.
After the Cultural Revolution, many sent-down youths moved out of China and engaged in collective reconstructions of historical experiences and immigration in various narrative forms. Therefore, the sent-down body assumes different meanings, as it now constitutes the neo-sent-down experience, which is the overseas experience.

**Literature Review**

Although current Asian American theorists and scholars (Lee 1999; Eng 2001; Bow 2001) also position their studies in body politics, they use different registers and lenses to discuss the relationship between sexual politics and Asian American identities. Rachel Lee’s *The Americas of Asian American Literature* analyzes works by Gish Jen, Jessica Hagedorn, and Karen Tei Yamashita to discuss how Asian American women write about America based on gender and sexuality. David Eng’s *Racial Castration* (2001) discusses perceptions of Asian American men through the lens of gender and sexuality and in the process of racial formation. He analyzes works by Asian American writers and filmmakers such as Frank Chin, Maxine Hong Kingston, and David Wong Louie, to name a few. Asian American masculinity is at the center of his study. Leslie Bow’s *Betrayal and Other Acts of Subversion* (2001) focuses on the relationship between Asian American femininity and citizenship in the context of race and cultural nationalism. She positions her study in feminism, sexual politics, and Asian American women’s literary works by writers such as Bharati Mukherjee, Amy Tan, or Le Ly Hayslip. While Lee, Eng, and Bow use sexual politics to explore meanings of Asian Americans in the complicated web of race, gender, and sexuality, they make efforts to analyze an overarching Asian
American identity. My project is informed by their studies but is very specific to contemporary Chinese immigrant women’s recent historical, political, and cultural experiences remembered through the female sent-down body. It adds a different lens to the study of contemporary Chinese immigrant identities and allows us to analyze history, politics, and culture that are embedded in the female sent-down body defined in Chinese immigrant women’s visual and literary texts.

Wenying Xu (2000) noted almost a decade ago that the growing community of Mainland Chinese in the United States “has found almost no voice in its newly adopted country other than through the publication of personal narratives of China’s political upheavals.” She also said, “This body of literature . . . represents a new and distinctive form of writing by Chinese writers in the English-speaking world” (203). She is among the few scholars interested in this body of literature and moves beyond a simple interpretation of victimization of individuals during the Cultural Revolution. In her view, some of these works such as Red Azalea act as a “way of engaging in a project of reconstituting identity in a different world” (208). She is insightful to argue that Min’s book shows individuals not only as victims but also as participants who victimize others.

Although historian and sinologist Peter Zarrow (1999) also suggests that memoirists of the Cultural Revolution are not only victims but also perpetrators, he is unable to locate themes of shame and self-doubt in this body of literature. He says that the memoirists of the Cultural Revolution are, like American soldiers in Vietnam, “victims and perpetrators” at the same time, but many American soldiers admitted they were murderers
not heroes. On the contrary, even though “themes of shame and self-doubt” are not unknown in memoirs of the Cultural Revolution, they “are muted” (178).

Zarrow treats personal narratives of the Cultural Revolution as “memoirs of exile” (165). He defines them as those written particularly by former Red Guards or other youths about their experiences before they left China for the United States (167), and “exile’ implies a forced removal that captures the profound alienation conveyed in [these] memoirs” (169). He also notices that very few memoirists write about “emigration to America as an integral part of” their narratives (183). Zarrow’s use of exile is arguable. He claims that “exile allowed a few survivors to begin their search to discover why their lives had been suddenly wrenched out of shape” (169). This seems to imply that Chinese memoirists were only able to write about the Cultural Revolution after they left China.

In his essay “Reflections on Exile” Edward Said (2000) argues that exile “is a condition of terminal loss” and exiles in our times are related to “modern warfare, imperialism, and the quasi-theological ambitions of totalitarianism,” because our age is “indeed the age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass immigration” (173-174). Said’s discussion of exiles points to involuntary dislocation embodied in exiles’ movement to places other than their homes and homeland, making it almost impossible for them to return home. When Zarrow tries to apply “memoirs of exile” to memoirs of the Cultural Revolution, he seems to be unaware of the fact that the Chinese government under Deng Xiaoping (1904 – 1997) admitted that the Cultural Revolution was a mistake. On June 29, 1981, the Chinese Communist Party passed a resolution regarding major
historical issues since the founding of P.R. China. It announced, “The Cultural Revolution from May 1966 to October 1976 brought severe losses and setbacks to the Party, the nation, and Chinese people. . . . Comrade Mao Zedong initiated the Cultural Revolution based on his leftist interpretations of the nation’s status quo . . . and they were completely wrong” (27). 5 The resolution that defined the nature of the Cultural Revolution has opened up more opportunities for Chinese authors and artists in China and overseas to reflect on the chaotic historical moment without holding them accountable for criticizing or writing about it. Zarrow, however, seems to argue that all the writers he analyzes are taking big political risks.

Before the resolution, the publication of Lu Xinhua’s novella The Scar (shanghen) (1978) established a new literary genre called Scar Literature. 6 Chinese writers, together with filmmakers, started to critically reflect on the Cultural Revolution. This means that the memoirists Zarrow examines did not have to wait to leave China to enjoy the “peace and freedom” to write about their recent past. Except for a few political dissidents, such as Liu Binyan, who was barred from returning to China in 1989 after he was a guest teacher in the United States, many memoirists have been able to travel between China and the United States without restrictions. 7 Some of them never mention why and how they left China, although they left either as self-funded students or on a Chinese government scholarship. For instance, Jung Chang (author of Wild Swans) and

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5 Refer to publications by The Party Literature Research Institute of CPC Central Government in 1985.《关于建国以来党的若干历史问题的决议注释本》（annotations to the Party resolutions on a few historical issues since the founding of P.R. China）.

6 Lu is a former sent-down youth and became famous for the novella. He was still a college freshman when it was published. He moved to the United States in the mid-1980s and has been working different jobs.

7 Liu openly supported the famous students’ democratic movement in Beijing while he was in the United States. He passed away in New Jersey in 2005.
Rae Yang (author of *Spider Eaters*) were on government scholarships but chose to stay in the United Kingdom or the United States after they earned their graduate degrees. Chang was sent to college because of her excellence as a sent-down youth and became an English teacher in Sichuan University after graduation. What she had was impossible for many of her peers at the time. She also had to be outstanding enough to get a government scholarship in 1978 to study linguistics in the United Kingdom, but it is ironic that she is one of the harshest overseas Chinese denouncing and criticizing the Chinese government. Other memoirists were free to leave China for America on student visas (Anchee Min) or immigrated to America because of their marriage to U.S. citizens (Liang Heng). Even though all of them chose not to return to China, and some have had different political views, they are now able to travel between China and the United States, and even have residence in China.

Therefore, while Zarrow conducts productive analyses of personal narratives of the Cultural Revolution, his readers need to be cautious about interpreting all these narratives as “memoirs of exile,” because they do not explain why Chang and Yang put themselves on exile when they left China on the government scholarship, or those who left China for educational purposes. Therefore, it is hard to generalize that personal narratives of the Cultural Revolution are those of exile.

Both Xu and Zarrow provide great insights that help us interpret reflections of victimization or exile in works about the Cultural Revolution. Their studies, however, were published in the 1990s, when new publications about the Cultural Revolution and scholarly attention to new trends and features of these works were limited. Many early
memoirs assumed salient tones of victimization and violence about the Cultural Revolution and celebrated the freedom of leaving China, so when they are examined in the frame of exile, they reflect forced and involuntary movement. Some recent publications also demonstrate some authors’ counterarguments with authors like Chang in, for instance, Some of Us: Chinese Women Growing Up in the Mao Era (2001). The contributors in this book suggest that examinations of historical experiences in China should not purely focus on “a dichotomized framework of victims vs. victimizers, good Chinese vs. evil Chinese” (Zhong xviii). They should be attentive to memories situated in “diverse and overlapping relationships with family, school, neighborhood, workplace, popular culture, rural China, as well as with the official ideology in the Mao era” (Zhong xxiv). However, Zhong and her colleagues have no intention to “exert experiences as historical truth;” they aim instead to recognize the historicity of these experiences (Zhong xxiii).

In the meantime, Xu and Zarrow focus primarily on memoirs, whereas there are different forms of representations of the Cultural Revolution and immigration among contemporary Chinese immigrants. Therefore, although Xu and Zarrow provide productive insights into memoirs of the Cultural Revolution, current studies of contemporary Chinese immigrants’ experiences and works should include different perspectives and forms of representations in the past twenty years.

There are two major limitations in the studies by Xu and Zarrow. First, there is a lack of attention to gender in reading and interpreting what contemporary Chinese immigrant women artists and authors do to recreate historical and cultural meanings
across continents. Second, they are not specific about how representations are constructed in the works by these women, because focus on looking for traces of political truths or applying the notion of exiles to memoirs of the Cultural Revolution.

There is very sparse research on the role of the gendered sent-down body in contemporary Chinese immigrant women’s efforts to construct historical and cultural meanings in their visual and literary narratives. Once again, the limitations of current studies of Chinese immigrant women’s visual texts (self-portraits and films) and literary works in English (memoirs and short stories) are three-fold. First, they do not treat the female sent-down body as a crucial concept for constructing historical and cultural experiences. Second, they do not consider varied historical and cultural experiences represented through the sent-down body in these texts. Lastly, they are narrow in scope because they do not connect body politics with studies of immigrant women’s experiences.

Analysis of the Chinese female sent-down body provides a focus on bodily historical experiences, which are unique in contemporary Chinese history and immigrants’ relocation. Although this focus is absent from burgeoning scholarship on Chinese immigrant women’s cultural productions (visual texts and literary works) since the 1990s, its absence yet provides room for further research interventions. It is in this context that my project makes a timely intervention by calling attention to the Chinese female sent-down body, which is not only the politicized and sexualized migrant body, but also the sexualized and racialized immigrant body.
Methodologies

I base methodologies in my project on my epistemological positions on feminism and transnational research. My project draws on two modes of scholarship -- transnational perspectives and feminist integrative interdisciplinary/transdisciplinary research. It also uses feminist scholarship on self-representation as well as critical visual methodology. These methodologies are not always used individually or separately in the chapters. Instead, they are integrated in my analyses.

The two modes of scholarship on transnational perspectives and integrative interdisciplinarity or transdisciplinarity reflect recent scholarly conversations about globalization in women’s studies, literature, cultural studies, history, sociology or anthropology. They also help elaborate different aspects of the female sent-down body through its relation to history, culture, and immigration in contemporary Chinese immigrant women’s visual and literary texts.

A transnational perspective that informs my methodology builds on current debates about transnational history. What makes transnational history useful in my project is its emphasis on a sense of movement and association with diaspora studies. Pierre-Yves Saunier (2009) suggests that the use of transnational perspectives has moved beyond “anthropology, cultural studies and sociology, with an increased presence in history, geography, gender studies, religious studies and political science” (1054). The American Historical Review (2006) published a special panel discussion of transnational
history writers reflect on the transnational perspective in history. Chris Bayly considers that a transnational perspective “gives a sense of movement and interpenetration” and “is broadly associated with the study of diasporas, social or political, which cross national boundaries, etc.” (1442). Isabel Hofmeyr believes that a transnational perspective “opens up broader analytical possibilities for understanding the complex linkages, networks, and actors in the global South,” and its “central concern [is] with movements, flows, and circulation, not simply as a theme or motif but as an analytic set of methods” (1444).

Another transnational perspective that informs my methodology is feminist transnational cultural studies, which is grounded in studying the relationship between gender, geography, and nation. Caren Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal (1994) suggest that feminist transnational practices depart from “the standpoint epistemology school of thought within feminist studies” and “focus on gendered forms of cultural hegemony at diverse levels in societies” (440). They agree with Gayatri Spivak who argues in Outside in the Teaching Machine (1993) that the task for transnational feminist cultural studies is “to negotiate between the national, the global, and the historical, as well as the contemporary diasporic” (256). At the same time, while Spivak stresses the importance of links of economic and social relations over similarities, Kaplan and Grewal also aim to practice “solidarity and coalition work in resistance to these linkages” when practicing transnational feminism (441). My project positions gender at the center of analyzing history, culture, and politics constructed by different power relations. Moreover, it

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9 Matthew Connelly is also a panel participant.
focuses on the female sent-down body in movement and diaspora as a concept built on political, cultural, and historical linkages between China and the United States in transnational cinema, literature, and art. Therefore, a transnational feminist reading of it in literary and visual narratives is very relevant in my studies of new meanings of Chinese immigration in the post-Mao era.

Other transnational feminist theorists and researchers such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ella Shohat, Constance Richards, and Katarzyna Marciniak et al. also challenge feminist discipline-based methodologies and emphasize the role of gender in the studies of national and cultural identities by studying various cultural practices and media. For instance, Ella Shohat argues that women and gender cannot be studied in isolation especially in a “transnational age typified by the global traveling” (1269). For her, “third-world women” are usually cast “into a fixed stereotypical role, in which they play the part of passive victims lacking any form of agency” (1269). Therefore, she shows concerns about how women of non-Western heritage are silenced and categorized into fixed ethnic or racial identities. Constance Richards, whose research is on transnational feminism and literature, contends, along similar lines, that in transnational literature, gender collides with race and national origin as well. By criticizing transnational feminists’ failure to envision literature as part of “a feminist theory and praxis that can cross without obliterating difference,” she calls for a focus on reading gender through a transnational perspective and “historical specificity” (x) in order to better understand self-reflexivity and self-growth in women’s literature. For her, it is imperative that women’s experiences should be viewed more broadly “than is
possible in localized situations” (13). Ella Shohat and Constance Richards, however, do not particularly address feminist concerns of ethnic/racial difference.

My project draws on scholarships of transnational perspectives in history, culture, and feminism. A transnational perspective is a way of interpreting visual and literary works and focuses on different social and cultural contexts that produce them. It puts Chinese immigrant women and their cultural production in a context that sees their ongoing process of building links and relationships with two homelands at various levels. It allows me to examine these links and relationships at the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual experiences, and immigration, thus amplifying Zarrow’s work on memoirs of exile.

A transnational perspective in my project is concerned with the movement of the Chinese female sent-down body between cultures and the pressures of intercultural artistic and literary production and the connections it builds with two cultures. When analyzing Chinese immigrant women artists and authors, I emphasize how their historical, political or immigration experiences powerfully shape the way they understand themselves.

My project also uses what Sally Kitch defines as feminist transdisciplinarity or integrative and reciprocal interdisciplinarity. Although interdisciplinarity is considered “the hallmark of women’s studies and feminist research” (Kitch 123), many researchers misunderstand it as multidisciplinary or cross-disciplinary and use “multidisciplinarity as a synonym for interdisciplinarity” (125). They tend to use the umbrella term interdisciplinarity while doing discipline-specific research. In “Feminist Interdisciplinary
Approaches to Knowledge Building” (2007), Kitch points out that transdisciplinarity (“integrative and reciprocal interdisciplinarity”) helps produce “the most nuanced and complex knowledge about women and gender” (131). In Kitch’s frame of feminist transdisciplinarity, research should integrate relevant analyses to elaborate a research question. One example she provides is that “visual and narrative cultures as a specialization within gender representation . . . combines the study of specific artistic or literary forms or genres with the analysis of material and political contexts and the constraints of production processes” (132, 135).

I could describe my project as one about Chinese immigrant women’s visual and literary narratives, which I have contextualized historically, culturally, and politically. The methods of transdisciplinarity enable me to cross examine these works with a focus on women and gender in general. These methods help me to explore a frame of analysis that is useful for interested scholars in cultural and political history, U.S. ethnic literary studies and art history. Most important, they help me to answer my research question: How do representations of history, culture, and politics in Chinese immigrant women’s art and literature reveal the inscription of the Chinese female sent-down body in mobilized by social and power relations. By employing transdisciplinary methodology, I analyze these texts not only as individual works, but also as those in relation to the history, politics, and culture that produced them in the Mao or post-Mao era.

Specific methodologies in my project integrate feminist methodologies of self-representations in literature and art, critical visual methodology, content and textual
analysis, and memory study with my analysis. Two chapters focus on self-representation in literature and art, and cultural studies methodologies are important for these analyses.

Many feminist theorists (Lorde, Smith & Watson, Kim, Lim, and Wong) are aware of “multiplying differences” and “multiple marginalities, of gender, ethnicity, nationality, and linguistic community” (Smith & Watson 24) in women’s autobiography. They demand attention to historical and ethnic specificity to interpret the genre. While these scholars do not specifically discuss immigrant women whose immigration became possible in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement and the 1965 immigration act, their work on self-representations open up possibilities to examine contemporary Chinese immigrant women’s works in the trajectory of immigrant texts.

With regard to visual art interpretations, my project uses content analysis together with critical visual methodology. According to Terry Barrett (2003), interpretations of content involve an examination of subject matter, medium, form, and context (199). I use Barrett’s model to interpret Chinese immigrant artist Hung Liu’s self-portraits. Although initially employed to “interpret written and spoken texts” (Rose 54), content analysis is methodologically explicit in reading art and visual images as it is about analyzing, among other things, cultural texts that are coded by categories identified through different sites in a piece of art or visual image. It allows for designing “coding categories” when examining a body of images and the broader “cultural context” (Rose 60). It can connect text, context, and codes around, for instance, power, race, and history. Content analysis is appropriate to interpreting Liu’s self-portraits, which also serve as cultural texts that contain various layers representing history, politics, culture, and immigration. Critical
visual methodology is also used to analyze Hung Liu’s works because it looks beyond images themselves and shows deliberate concerns about the site of the production or audience. Therefore, it can complement content analysis in its scope and depth of analyzing visual images such as Liu’s self-portraits.

This project also draws on trauma studies, particularly studies related to memory. The Chinese female sent-down body is often a traumatized and abused body, and this becomes evident in the narratives of contemporary Chinese immigrant women who survived the Cultural Revolution and became immigrants in the United States. For Elizabeth Cowie, trauma “consists in an historical ‘real’” and “attests to its endless impact on a life” (192-193). By studying traumatic remembering and forgetting in a few films, she concludes that the act of remembering occurs “through filmed actuality and fiction in which the remembered is both personal history and public history” and therefore “filmed actuality is always a remembering of the past” (196). Although Cowie does not specifically address a filmmaker’s role in mediating how the body remembers, her study and arguments provide a lens to study contemporary Chinese immigrant women’s narratives and films about the history, politics, and culture inscribed on the Chinese female sent-down body, especially in Joan Chen’s directorial debut *Xiu Xiu: The Sent Down Girl* (1998).

**Structure of the Dissertation**

My project organizes chapters by how they demonstrate relationships of the Chinese female sent-down body to the texts I analyze. Part I focuses on the sent-down
body that is represented as the politicized and sexualized migrant body during the Cultural Revolution. Chapter 1 analyzes the abused and traumatized female sent-down body represented in Joan Chen’s film *Xiu Xiu: The Sent Down Girl* (1995). It positions a female sent-down youth’s experiences in a complex web of power relations and examines the director’s cinematic construction of an abused and traumatized female sent-down body. In this chapter, I also discuss how emasculation of men causes changes of gender relations, and I argue the female sent-down body represented in the film is also a site for shifting power control.  

Chapter 2 uses Anchee Min’s *Red Azalea* (1994) to discuss how the female sent-down body is punished and transgressed. Both forms of the sent-down body are reflections of the political control of desires and relationship. This chapter first focuses on the character Little Green’s insanity after being punished for pursuing a heterosexual love relationship. It also discusses lesbian desires for each other among sent-down youths as a transgressive act, arguing that such an act not only brings to light complicated love relationships during the Cultural Revolution but also de-essentializes gender and sexuality categories in transgressive desires.

Part II focuses on the sent-down body as the immigrant body. In particular, it examines sexualized and racialized female sent-down body represented in short stories, poetry, and self-portraits. Wang Ping and Hung Liu particularly position their works in relation to history, culture, immigration, race and ethnicity. Chapter 3 analyzes the role of the female sent-down body in gendered and racialized constructions of Chinese immigrant identities in Wang Ping’s short stories and poetry. I argue that Wang’s literary works demonstrate her efforts to juxtapose experiences in China and the United States to
construct Chinese immigrant women’s identities. These experiences are represented in body odor, hair, and sexual identity. Chapter 4 examines the sexualized and racialized female sent-down body in Hung Liu’s five self-portraits. However, not all of these portraits address the body’s sexual experiences. While *Resident Alien* (1988) is related to the racialization of the Chinese female body as exotic and sensual (fortune cookie), *A Third World* (1993), *Proletarian* (2006), *Immigrant* (2006), and *Citizen* (2006) demonstrate Liu’s construction and interpretation of being a Chinese immigrant woman by weaving contemporary Chinese political and cultural history in her American identity.
Chapter 1: The Abused and Traumatized Sent-down Body in Transnational Cinema

Female sent-down youths’ sexual experiences during the Cultural Revolution are among the most important contemporary historical and political experiences in China. Liu Xiaomeng, a Chinese specialist in the sent-down movement, reflects that gender is very important in the study of sent-down youths’ experiences. Although Mao promoted gender equality in the rhetoric about Chinese women holding up “half of the sky” while Chinese men hold up the other half, sinologists are interested in gender equality in practice during the Cultural Revolution. In his studies, Liu finds that female sent-down youths encountered more hardships than their male counterparts did. According to incomplete statistics from the State Council of P. R. China in 1973, “among the 23,000 cases of violence against sent-down youths since 1969 in 24 provinces, cities, and autonomous areas, 70% were cases of raping female sent-down youths. With an increasing number of female sent-down youths, rape cases increased as well.” He also finds that victims chose not to report sexual abuse under the double bondage of “feudal traditions and totalitarianism” that politically, socially, and culturally promote male dominance” (304). In the meantime, there are many studies, fictional or non-fictional

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writings, and visual narratives about sent-down youths’ lives in the countryside or on the farm, but few address female sent-down youths’ sexual experiences.

Under such circumstances, Chinese American actress and director Joan Chen’s directorial debut *Xiu Xiu: The Sent Down Girl* (*Celestial Bath* 1998) catches attention with its cinematic representation of historical, political, and sexual experiences through a female sent-down body. Few Chinese American immigrant women have access to producing or directing films in the United States, and these very few, such as Lisa Lu (An-Mei Hsu in *Joy Luck Club*), Vivian Wu (An Mei’s Mother in *Joy Luck Club*) Luo Yan (Madame Wu Ailian in *Pavilion of Women*), and Joan Chen (Wan Jun in *The Last Emperor*) have made efforts to examine the cross-cultural nature of identity and historical experiences. After performing or participating in Hollywood films for years, they started to find their own niche to make meanings of being Chinese American women by using a cinematic language of their own. Joan Chen’s *Xiu Xiu: The Sent Down Girl* (1998) serves as a good example of using the female body to tell a general audience, with dialogues in Chinese and subtitles in English, what female sent-down youths might have been through during the Cultural Revolution.¹¹ In the film, Xiu Xiu’s body is a sent-down body that is abused in a complex web of power relations.

Michel Foucault states that the body is a politically inscribed entity and is marked by histories and practices of control. It is along this line that Edward Mallot proposes that history and the body are reciprocally inscribed on each other. Like his counterparts

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¹¹ Some critics argue that film focuses on an impossible romance between a man and a young woman by pushing politics to the background. And yet, the film portrays how the characters compromise or sacrifice under political pressures.
in memory studies (Casey, Connerton, and Haaken), he also proposes that the body remembers experiences and multiple histories. Feminist theorists, such as Susan Bordo, also suggest that the body plays a significant role in producing meanings of history and culture. Informed by these theorists and scholars, this chapter will analyze the abused or traumatized female sent-down body in *Xiu Xiu* through cultural and political history as well as gendered body memory. It first discusses how Chen, as an immigrant, is able to move beyond the political context in which her Chinese precursors direct films so that she can portray female sent-down youths’ lives from an overseas Chinese woman’s perspective. It then focuses on the main character Xiu Xiu’s tragic experiences in relation to different power relations. Some key issues in this chapter include how the Chinese female sent-down body is represented in the cinema as objectified and abused during the Cultural Revolution and how Chinese men’s masculinity is defined through ability to penetrate or undermined through castration.

**Xiu Xiu: Synopsis**

*Xiu Xiu* is based on the novella “Celestial Bath” (1995) by Yan Geling. The female main character Xiu Xiu is a sent-down youth from Chengdu, the capital city of Sichuan Province in China. She and many of her peers receive re-education in the Tibetan steppes during the mid-1970s. Xiu Xiu is assigned to learn horsemanship under the male main character Lao Jin’s supervision. They share a tent and live a nomadic life - - moving from place to place with their horses looking for green grass. Lao Jin’s penis is injured when he is involved in a fight at eighteen, so he is unable to perform sexual
penetration. While Xiu Xiu stays with Lao Jin, most of her peers return to the city. She is also eager to go home. Without power or connections, however, she is forced to trade her body -- as suggested by an exploitative male peddler -- for a pass to go home. She is first coerced to have sex with the peddler who takes away her virginity, and then has sex with a few other men who, like the peddler, also promise to send her back to Chengdu, her home city. Lao Jin tries to protect Xiu Xiu but to no avail. She finds herself pregnant eventually. After being raped by a male sent-down youth in a local clinic where she has an abortion, she leaves the clinic and loses consciousness in the snow. Lao Jin finds her and carries her back to their tent. At the end of the film, Xiu Xiu asks Lao Jin to shoot her. Lao Jin thus kills her, after which he also kills himself. They lie side by side in the bathing place Lao Jin had dug on the hill that is close to their tent so that Xiu Xiu could bathe herself.

From Performing Stereotype to Gaining Voice through Transnational Filmmaking\textsuperscript{12}

Joan Chen’s film \textit{Xiu Xiu} is a product of her efforts to reposition herself as a Chinese immigrant actress. It indicates that Chen reconnects with a recent past that her Chinese peers and she share and defines who she is today. As a celebrity traversing two languages and cultures, Chen is better equipped than many of her Chinese peers in terms of her knowledge and understanding of both China and the United States. She is fully

\textsuperscript{12} Transnational filmmaking/cinema in my project refers to films made by filmmakers who are displaced from their home countries for various reasons.
aware that she needs to negotiate the east with the west by positioning herself across two cultures.

Chen was first a famous actress in China, then a no-name international student in the United States, and eventually an actress in an Oscar winning Hollywood feature — *The Last Emperor* (1987), and currently a director and actress who is busy in acting and making films in two countries.\(^\text{13}\) During her early years in Hollywood, Chen worked hard against adversity and took whatever roles she could get. She used some of Mao’s teachings to inspire her at the most difficult time of her life in the United States.\(^\text{14}\) Her acting debut in the United States was Wayne Wang’s *Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart* (1985) but she did not receive any critical attention. As luck would have it, she got a role in *Tai-Pan* (1986) after Dino De Laurentiis noticed her in a parking lot. Based on James Clavell’s novel of the same title, this film is about two English men battling to rule Hong Kong during the first Opium Wars (1840-1842). Chen played prostitute May-May who helped one of the men. Although the film was not well reviewed and Chen was criticized by the Chinese media for nudity in the film, she started to get more attention in Hollywood. In 1986, she played opium-addicted and lunatic empress Wan Rong in *The Last Emperor* (1987), which won nine Oscars. Later on, she appeared as Josie Packard in the TV series *Twin Peaks* (1990).

Unfortunately, Chen is mainly remembered in the West for her roles in these films or TV series. She has not been able to get major roles in Hollywood films since *The Last

\(^\text{13}\) She has performed many roles in Chinese films and TV dramas since the 1990s.

\(^\text{14}\) In one of her interviews with CCTV Channel 1 in 2007, she told the host Zhu Jun that she used Mao’s teachings to inspire her at the most difficult time of her life in the United States. She said that she found those teachings very helpful.
Emperor. In interviews, she has expressed frustration at the limited roles she can play as a Chinese woman, as Hollywood films usually focus on stereotyped exotic Chinese women. When Chen had her first audition for a film that had a Chinese female character, she was rejected for not looking Chinese enough. She said in one of her interviews with Franz Lidz at BNET (2000), “Somehow my clothing, my makeup, the way I looked wasn't their image of a Chinese woman” (Lidz)\(^\text{15}\). In other words, her image did not match Hollywood filmmakers’ stereotyped images of a Chinese woman. After Chen’s acting debut in Tai-Pan, however, many Hollywood producers and directors started to regard her as an icon of the exotic Chinese female body in the tradition of Hollywood stereotypes of Chinese women. She told Walter Chaw in an interview in 2005, “I was not exotic when I was in China and obviously I've always been exotic since I've been here.”\(^\text{16}\) Her statement clearly addresses Hollywood expectations of her role as an actress and she is aware how difficult it is for her to get any major roles to show the American audience different images of Chinese women.

Chinese actors and actresses have played more roles in Hollywood movies in the post-Mao era. It is not only because China and Chinese movies have caught more public attention since the Cultural Revolution but also because Chinese actors and actresses are in demand to play certain roles. Nevertheless, American filmmaking is still very conservative about giving leading or important roles to Chinese or Chinese American actors and actresses. After living in the United States for many years, Chen has realized


\(^{16}\) Refer to http://www.filmdreakcentral.net/notes/savingfaceinterview.htm for interview details.
how important it is for her to be cross-cultural instead of positioning herself in one cultural location. She started to engage herself in cross-cultural filmmaking in the late 1990’s. In “Joan Chen Returns to Chinese Film,” an essay that appeared in *China Post* on October 17, 2007, Min Lee suggests that Chen “enjoys going back and forth between Chinese and Western productions”\(^\text{17}\) and has played many different roles in films directed by Chinese directors in Hong Kong, Taiwan, or Mainland China and won quite a few awards. Chen has also played different roles in films directed by Chinese American directors such as Ang Lee (*Lust, Caution* 2007) and Alice Wu (*Saving Face* 2005). Between 2000 and 2008, she appeared in 15 films, and 6 of them were shot in Chinese and directed by China-based Chinese directors.\(^\text{18}\)

In addition to pursuing her acting career in China and the United States, Chen wanted to direct her own films to tell certain stories and experiences through her own lens. She started to expand her career path by directing films in the late 1990’s. She told Chaw, “So when I came here, I came as an immigrant with an immigrant's perspective on things.” Being an immigrant automatically distinguishes her from American born Chinese Americans because she has a recent past rooted outside the United States. She also told Chaw, “We need to tell our own stories because, look, nobody else knows what it's like to grow up in your shoes. If they can't ask you, who can they ask? A white person can't write a Chinese experience. I'm not blaming anybody, you can't get into the blame game, you just gotta do it yourself.”\(^\text{19}\) In that interview with Chaw, Chen made it


\(^{18}\) Chen uses her Chinese name (Chen Chong) in Chinese films while Joan Chen in films shot in English.

\(^{19}\) Refer to note 15 for reference.
clear that being a recent immigrant enables her to examine certain experiences in a way that many other people cannot.

In 1997, she adapted Yan’s novella “Celestial Bath” (1995) in her directorial debut *Xiu Xiu: The Sent Down Girl*. In Arthur Dong’s new documentary *Hollywood Chinese* (2008), she says that she was able to make the “movie [she] wanted to make.” In Chen’s view, the film portrays a female sent-down youth who is enthusiastic to participate in developing socialism and moves to the Tibetan steppes for re-education. Nonetheless, “nobody needed her, everybody forgot her. So she started to trade herself to try to go home,” according to Chen.20 The film won, among other things, the best director award at Taiwan’s Oscar Golden Horse Award in 1998. Although Chen grew up during the Cultural Revolution, her film *Xiu Xiu* is by no means autobiographical. She uses the film to “explore the universal implications of a local event” in order to “reclaim [contemporary] Chinese history,” as Feng Lan writes in her commentary on the film (193). In Lan’s words, Chen wants to tell “a story about my generation, about a whole ten years of our lives, and nobody really told it” (193). Through the film, Chen makes some aspects of female sent-down youths’ historical experiences visible. Meanwhile, the stories in the film are not only those that “nobody has told” but also serve as a critique of the Cultural Revolution through a Chinese American female director’s lens. When Chaw asked why Chen made this film, she said, “I would love to shoot some movies for the audience in the world, not just to do a Chinese movie for a Chinese audience. I want to

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20 Yan Geling is one of the most productive overseas Chinese women novelists and screenwriters and publishes in both Chinese and English. Many of her short stories have been adapted into films, including “Celestial Bath.” She and Joan Chen are long time friends from China to the United States. They are planning to make Yan’s historical novel *Fusang* into a film.
go back to China to tell a Chinese story for the rest of the world.” Obviously, Chen has a specific audience in mind when she makes that statement. At the same time, she attempts to provide her audience with her own interpretations of the Cultural Revolution through filmmaking.

Chen, unlike China-based directors, has been relocated both physically and culturally. She identifies herself as an immigrant “with an immigrant's perspective on things,” as she told Chaw. Although she shares with China-based directors their historical experiences, she is also able to reconstruct those experiences with more freedom and cross-cultural perspectives that her Chinese peers do not have. In an interview with Yan Geling in 1998 Chen claims that “distance has made memory more collective and global instead of individual and local. Take my own memories [of the Cultural Revolution] for example, they traverse locality, condense themselves. . . . So such memories are different from those of many Chinese still living in China” (Yan 41-42). Although Chen is right about her difference from the Chinese living in China, it is problematic for her to emphasize the difference without positioning herself in a Chinese context at the same time. Put another way, because she is fresh from the most recent political turmoil in China, it is almost impossible for her to deny her connections with contemporary Chinese culture and history even though differences in memories exist. What Chen dismisses is the transnational nature of her film as well as her subject position. As an immigrant living in the United States, she has ongoing ties with China. On the one hand, she is a Westernized Chinese actress and director. On the other, her
film represents Chinese experiences during the Cultural Revolution through a Chinese female director’s lens.

The reception of Chen’s film *Xiu Xiu* in China shows that Chinese audiences do not think it truthfully represents the Cultural Revolution and individuals’ experiences at the time.\(^{21}\) They also criticize Chen for trying to please western audiences. Such responses reveal Chinese audiences’ expectations of overseas Chinese filmmakers and their nationalist sentiment.\(^{22}\) Chen apparently did not expect critical responses from Chinese people along the line of nationalism when she intended to present some aspects of historical experiences of her generation.

Richard Corliss, a *Time* magazine film columnist, quotes Bernardo Bertolucci who made comments on Chen’s positioning.\(^{23}\) Bertolucci says, “Working with her, I had the feeling she was somehow in exile, not always comfortable. So I love the idea that my own Empress in exile went back to China as a film director” (2).\(^{24}\) In “The Sent Down Girl,” an essay published in *Beijing Scene*, Steven Schwankert also describes Chen’s dilemma.\(^{25}\) He writes:

> Joan Chen feels both “everywhere and nowhere” at present. When the Shanghai starlet’s directorial debut *Xiu Xiu: The Sent Down Girl* (Tian

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\(^{21}\) Although the film is banned in China for shooting without the government permission, Chinese audiences have access to the film through internet or other sources. Many of their comments reflect their critique of the film in representing the Cultural Revolution.

\(^{22}\) A France-based Chinese immigrant director Dai Sijie’s *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* (2000) is also about sent-down youths’ lives, but receives similar resistance in China as Chen’s film. It is criticized for using Balzac’s novels to enlighten sent-down youths, among other things.


\(^{24}\) A famous director Bernardo Bertolucci asked Joan Chen to cast Wan Jun (the ill-fated Empress) in *The Last Emperor* (1987).

\(^{25}\) Steven Schwankert. “Info Appreciated: Essay on Joan Chen.” Email to the author. 16 August 2008. According to Schwankert, who has interviewed Joan Chen a few times, the essay was first published on March 26, 1999 by Asiaweek (1975-2001), a now defunct Time-Warner publication based in Hong Kong.
Yu or Heavenly Bath in Chinese) garnered seven Golden Horse awards, Taiwan’s version of the Oscars, the movie was classified as a Mainland film. But if Chen applies to have the film distributed in China, it will be categorized as a foreign flick. “I’m a bastard wherever I go,” Chen says with a sigh, sitting in a coffee shop within walking distance of her San Francisco home.26

It is not surprising that Chen should describe her film and her confusion in those words because what she has encountered -- issues of belonging -- is not uncommon for recent Chinese immigrant writers and artists. As discussed in another chapter, the Chinese American artist Hung Liu shares Chen’s dilemma. She says that she often feels suspended between two cultures. What is more difficult for Chen, however, lies in the fact that she has to battle Hollywood expectations of her being an exotic Chinese woman while finding her way into filmmaking. Consequently, it is harder for her to announce adamantly, like Hung Liu, that she wants to express her Chineseness as clearly as she can. Nonetheless, she has managed to combine her Chinese background with her recent American experiences, particularly in her debut feature.

Virinder Kalra and her colleagues (2005) explain cultural configurations of diaspora by saying, “People do not neatly fit into categories, as might be the case for flowers or plants. . . . Diaspora can denote ideas about belonging, about place and about the way in which people live their lives. The where you are at is a combination of roots and routes” (29). They further argue, “Belonging is both about being from a place and a process of arrival. Belonging, then, is never a simple question of affiliation to a singular

idea of ethnicity or nationalism, but rather about the multivocality of belongings” (29). Recent Chinese immigrant women and their experiences have troubled conventional perceptions of their experiences and identities because they are embedded in multiple contexts. Christina Lane argues in *Feminist Hollywood* (2000) that women directors and their films should “be considered in relation to their historical moment, in which questions about commerce and art, politics and ideology, and text and reception are growing increasingly more complex and relative” (15). In Chen’s case, it is the multiplicity of affiliation that makes her and her film more meaningful for us to understand Chinese immigrant women’s experiences in multiple geopolitical, historical, and cultural contexts.

**Gender, Cinema, and the Cultural Revolution: Xie Jin, Zhang Nuanxin, Joan Chen**

Chen’s film *Xiu Xiu*, however, is not a product of any isolated efforts and reflections on the Cultural Revolution. It demonstrates continual efforts among China-based or overseas Chinese filmmakers to present historical experiences through different lenses. Therefore, it is necessary to put Chen and her film *Xiu Xiu* in a broader context of Chinese films about the Cultural Revolution before any close reading of the film can be done.

*Xiu Xiu* is a part of Chinese immigrant women’s collective efforts to understand themselves in history and culture as well as a part of China-based film directors’ collective reflections on a history Chinese people will never forget. It follows the trajectory of contemporary Chinese filmmakers, such as Xie Jin and Zhang Nuanxin, in
their efforts to construct the Cultural Revolution through gendered experiences. Chen is able to position her film in the broader context of post-Cultural Revolution filmmaking. As an immigrant living in the United States, however, she is also able to move beyond this context by exploring deeper meanings of sexual politics during the Cultural Revolution with the freedom that her Chinese precursors and peers do not have. It is, therefore, important to examine her film Xiu Xiu in relation to the films by Xie and Zhang.

Xie and Zhang are among major Chinese directors whose films demonstrate, among other things, how Chinese people’s sexual experiences under totalitarianism are inextricably linked to political concerns and movements. The gendered body is clearly a significant component in constructing histories and memories in their films. In one way or another, they and their films are relevant to an understanding of Chen’s film that also uses sexual experiences to reflect on the Cultural Revolution.

Although Chinese films have covered a wide range of subject matter when representing the Cultural Revolution, sexual experiences as a part of political movements are under-represented. Unlike their literary peers, many filmmakers shy away from critically analyzing how sexual experiences are intertwined with political concerns. Nonetheless, political agendas complicate Chinese people’s sexual experiences in the Mao era. After P. R. China was established in 1949, class and class struggle were highly prioritized and “penetrated people’s minds and became an integral part of the world view
of the common people” (Lü 554). The socialist ideology of love and marriage was closely related to political and social class status, and personal relationships were highly politicized. In the first three decades of Mao China, people’s lives and political careers had much to do with their class status: the workers, the peasants, the petite bourgeoisie, and the national-capitalists. The Communist Party and great masses evaluated individuals according to their family backgrounds and wealth and put them into specific class categories without consulting them. According to Mao and his administration, the working class was the leading force of revolution while peasants were politically weak but “had the potential for effective political action” (Meisner 8). The petty bourgeoisie was a swing class that could go different directions. It could be a possible coalition force if educated properly. The national-capitalists were enemies who should be eliminated.

Under such circumstances, workers and poor peasants were not encouraged to fall in love or marry people from the petite bourgeoisie or the enemy class. Otherwise, they would put their careers or even their families in danger. At that time, “Problems of Life Style” (zuofengwenti) and “Problems of Political Position” (lichangwenti) became popular phrases to describe those in unacceptable relationships. In response to the new socialist idea of love and relationship, Chinese films had to represent sexual politics in a politically correct way and demonstrate that love and marriage were more political than personal.

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27 In “A Step Toward Understanding Popular Violence in China’s Cultural Revolution,” Lü Xiuyuan examines how popular violence has been re-conceptualized and addressed in historical and literary accounts.
28 Maurice Meisner’s *Mao’s China and After* (1999) is an influential book on policies and politics in contemporary China.
With the Cultural Revolution coming to an end in 1976, Chinese filmmakers were able to construct a recent past that denied desires and promoted politically correct relationships. Film historian Paul Clark, who has published extensive works on Chinese films made shortly after the Cultural Revolution, suggests that post-Cultural Revolution Chinese filmmakers made collective efforts to reassess “the relationship between film art and politics” and “the experience of the previous 30 years” in filmmaking (Clark 314). In 1979 Zhang Nuanxin and Li Tuo wrote a ground-breaking essay in which they complained that Chinese films had failed to “honestly, naturally, and vividly reflect real life” (19). They also argued that changes after the Cultural Revolution demanded “that literature and art adjust accordingly, and film should be among the first to make them” (19).

In a broader context of change, therefore, many Chinese filmmakers started to reconsider, among other things, sexual politics under totalitarianism. They challenged an absence of individual desires in politically correct films during the Cultural Revolution and inserted love and desires as legitimate historical experiences as well. Xie Jin, Zhang Nuanxin, Chen Kaige, and Jiang Wen are representative Chinese directors whose works construct and analyze sexual politics through different experiences.

Xie is believed to be an “old school” director who employs politically correct narrative strategies in his features. While some film scholars complain that he makes “Confucian Films,” some others consider him “the Chinese equivalent of John Ford of

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29 In 1983, Paul Clark published an article “Film-making in China: From the Cultural Revolution to 1981” in China Quarterly. It has a historical and critical review of Chinese filmmaking during the Cultural Revolution.
Casablanca, with ‘cultural and political importance in [the films’] own right’” (Hayford 120).\textsuperscript{30} In contrast, Zhang is one of the major directors in the New Era, who challenges the old school and aims at incorporating western filmic language into Chinese filmmaking. Notwithstanding certain nuanced differences in filming techniques and filmic language, their films, together with some other films in the early 1980s, focus on “maudlin stories of sacrifice and suffering” (Clark 2)\textsuperscript{31} and collectively write historical experiences in a new light. Xie Jin’s films usually portray how male-female relationships are intertwined with political concerns. Zhang Nuanxin focuses on denial of sexual desires and reconstruction of sexual identity. Chen Kaige and Jiang Wei were also directors whose films describe Chinese people’s sexual experiences\textsuperscript{32} but Xie and Zhang are the most important directors whose representations of female and male experiences have a great impact on Joan Chen’s directorial debut Xiu Xiu.

Xie is especially relevant to an understanding of Chen’s film. On the one hand, Xie discovered Chen and asked her to play a few protagonist roles in some films about the Cultural Revolution. Chen considered him a role model and great teacher. On the other hand, Xie is considered a master of constructing historical experiences in the Chinese cinema and has a great impact on other Chinese directors, including Chen. It is almost impossible to discuss Chen without first discussing his influence on Chen. Zhang


\textsuperscript{31} This appears in Paul Clark’s Reinventing China: A Generation and Its Films (2005) that provides insight into post-Cultural Revolution Chinese films. Although he studies younger directors who came of age during the Cultural Revolution, he also briefly discusses earlier directors such as Xie Jin.

\textsuperscript{32} Chen Kaige addresses homosexuality in Farewell My Concubine (1993) while Jiang Wen demonstrates desires in puberty in The Heat of the Sun (1994). Joan Chen plays a role in one of Jiang’s films The Sun Also Rises (2007).
is also relevant in a discussion of Chen’s film because she and Chen have certain similarities in representing the Cultural Revolution. Both focus on sent-down female youths and their experiences at a time of endless political movements.

Xie is one of the most influential directors in contemporary Chinese filmmaking. Many of his films use gender and relationships to address historical issues and represent histories. He, however, uses women only to contribute to his male characters’ heroism. For instance, *Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (1980) shows how two women, Song Wei and Feng Qinglan, handle relationships during political chaos but it gives more weight to Luo Qun, a heroic and legendary male figure whose traits and persistence make him an admirable man. In the film, Xie tells stories of Luo living through a few major political movements from 1957 to 1977. Song and Feng both have a relationship with Luo at one point of his life. Their relationships change because Song and Feng respond differently to political concerns during the Anti-Rightist Campaign (1957) and the Cultural Revolution.

Song falls in love with Luo when he is the party commissar in their team before the Anti-Rightist Campaign. Luo is successful and talented while Song is beautiful. According to Chinese traditions, they are a perfect couple. Song, however, turns her back on Luo and writes to break up with him after he is condemned as a rightist and sent down to a village at the foot of Tianyun Mountain. In return for her loyalty to the Communist

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33 Xie is especially important to Joan Chen’s career because Chen became famous for her role in *Youth* (1976) directed by Xie. She took a few other leading roles in Xie’s films afterwards and won a few rewards. Chen gave Xie credit for changing her life and wrote an essay in memory of him after he passed away on Oct. 18, 2008.

34 The Anti-Rightist Campaign started in 1957 when Luo was condemned as a rightist. Persecution of him did not stop during the Cultural Revolution. The wrongs against him only ended after the Cultural Revolution.
Party, the local party leaders give her a leadership position but remorse tortures her for twenty years. Song’s friend Feng, on the other hand, loves Luo against all odds and stands by him for twenty years. She chooses to stay with him when everybody else leaves him. For two decades, she sacrifices her health and career by giving him whatever support she has. Her health fails shortly after the Cultural Revolution, which leads to her death before the Communist Party corrects its wrongs against Luo.

Xie also shows his audience that jealousy and selfishness are responsible for political condemnations in *Legend of Tianyun Mountain*. For example, Song’s husband Wu Yao “ensured [Luo] spent two decades in disgrace and hardships” and used “the system for personal vendetta and refuses to” correct past wrongs of Luo (Clark 316-317). He refuses to correct the wrongs against Luo because he is afraid that Song will go back to Luo. As a party leader in charge, he hides letters of appeal from Luo’s wife and even physically abuses Song who finds out about the letters.

Xie’s *Hibiscus Town* (1986) also intertwines relationships with political movements. It puts women at the center of conflict and suggests how relationships are inseparable from political concerns. Hu Yuying, the protagonist, is an innkeeper’s daughter and owns a small but successful business selling bean-curd soup in Hisbiscus Town. She also builds a house with the money she makes. Li Guoxiang, a local party leader, is jealous of Hu for her beauty and popularity. She re-assesses Hu when carrying out “leftist policies of class struggle, [labels Hu and her husband] New Rich Peasants,” which reduces them to enemy class members (Hayford 120). Li likes Gu Yansheng, a war veteran, who has no interest in her. Thinking that Gu must like Hu, Li uses her
power and tries every means to make Hu’s life miserable -- confiscating her house, humiliating her at organized mass-struggle meetings, having her husband executed, forcing her to sweep the street, and sending her new husband to jail, to name a few. She learns later on, however, that Gu denies himself of any desires because his penis got wounded during the Civil War (1946-1949). He is castrated and unable to engage in any sexual activities to satisfy any women. Disappointed, Li turns to a man lower in rank and political status in order to satisfy her own desires.

Although Xie puts much emphasis on women’s experiences, his films are not feminist in essence: women are either portrayed to help make his male characters heroic figures or communicate traditional expectations of Chinese women. At the same time, he is cautious not to reprimand institutional oppression or abuse of power on various levels. His criticism of the political movements is mild in nature when he reduces individuals’ sufferings and miseries to those caused by jealousy or selfishness. His protagonists usually live with what befalls them without resistance or complaints because they believe in the Communist Party or the socialist cause.

Like Xie, Chen also uses women’s experiences to represent the Cultural Revolution. However, she is the only director who relentlessly exposes sexual exploitation and victimization of sent-down girls. Unlike Xie who always has a happy ending in his films and sends out a message that good eventually overcomes evil, Chen goes beyond political correctness by revealing a dark side of sexual exploitation and victimization of women during the Cultural Revolution. Her film relentlessly demonstrates how social events such as relocation of urban youths to the countryside
leave them vulnerable to various forms of violence, thus going far beyond Xie on this topic.

Zhang Nuanxin’s *Sacrificed Youth* (1985), the first movie about sent-down youths in China, is also relevant to an understanding of Chen’s film. For Chinese American film critic Zhang Yingjin (2006), *Sacrificed Youth* is about “a Han girl rediscovering true meanings of life” (86). In this film, Zhang Nuanxin provides more in-depth explorations of female identity construction through the body and sexual politics than Xie. She demonstrates how Li Chun, a Han girl from Beijing, transforms from being a young woman who denies feminine beauty to being a woman who learns to accept the beauty of the female body. It also shows how Li Chun learns to embrace love during the Cultural Revolution. For Zhang, Li’s experiences of being a sent-down youth actually help enrich her life. Clark is very specific about Li’s sent-down life. He says, “Li Chun, the heroine, slowly becomes aware of the centrality in Dai life of beauty, nature and instinct. . . . [and] is awakened to her own youth and an awareness of her own body” (188). As a city girl sent to a remote Dai village in the Southwest China, Li finds it hard to ease herself into the Dai culture at first. She, however, gradually understands what it means to be a female after living with the Dai youths for a few years. Like many of her peers in Beijing, Li learns about abstinence and self-denial in terms of sexual identity. When she lives in Beijing, any proof of pro-bourgeois life styles, such as fashion or desires, is enough to make someone a target of mass criticism. Emily Honig

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35 There are 56 ethnic minority groups in China, among which Han is the biggest and dominant group.
36 Dai is one of the 56 ethnic groups in China. The Dai people live in Yunnan Province. Their religion is Buddhism, and they have their own language.
studies sent-down youths’ memoirs and oral history and suggests that, “in terms of love, people were criticized and struggled against, put in jail. . . . All books about love were labeled pornographic, all songs about love labeled low-class. Men and women in love were considered hoodlums” (144). With this kind of education, Li arrives at the Dai village, unprepared to witness the freedom to explore meanings of life in style and romance in the village.

Li first experiences a cultural shock when some Dai girls bathe naked in a river by the village. She is taken aback when seeing them swim and wash their hair and bodies because the scene is indecent and unacceptable for her. As a young woman from the dominant Han group, she learns that the female body should be covered with neutral colors and women should be silent about desires. It is considered shameless if young women wear colorful clothes or change their hairstyles unless they are needed for artistic performance. Therefore, she is always in white, grey, or blue. She ties her hair into a ponytail. She looks like an out-of-place ugly duckling among the Dai girls. They do not want to include her because she looks so different and she does not want to be one of them because it is hard for her to accept their lifestyles. Nonetheless, Li changes her perceptions of Dai youths over time. Slowly and firmly, she is aware that she should get out of her abstinence and pursue a different life. She is seen later in the movie to wear Dai costume, tie her hair like a Dai girl, and sing together with Dai girls.

Li is also surprised at how Dai youths express affection and flirt with each other. The Dai tradition is to find true love through singing (Dui Ge). Young men and young women usually compete with each other in singing songs. The best singers from each
group will start to date. At the same time, they are free to express their feelings about each other without going through any censorship. That contradicts what Li learns in Beijing. Back at home, it is a shame to discuss relationships among youths. Self-criticism is very popular when young men and young women find themselves falling in love or desiring someone. The Dai village here seems untouched by the socialist ideas of love and marriage and unfolds a completely new world in front of Li. She and a male sent-down youth from a different village meet at the postal office in town and like each other at first sight. They happily date each other for some time before she returns to Beijing for college education. She returns to learn that her boyfriend is buried under the rubbles of a landslide shortly after she leaves for Beijing. Buried with him is the entire village in which he resides. Although the film has a melancholy ending, it follows a city girl’s journey from self-abstinence to awakening on three levels -- regaining appreciation of the female body, nurturing true love, and understanding meanings of life in a new light.

Chen and Zhang share similarities in using the female body to picture female sent-down youths’ experiences through a feminist lens. Both are aware that the female body is manipulated during the Cultural Revolution and sexual identity is buried under political concerns. Both have bathing scenes that are spiritual in nature. In these scenes both Xiu Xiu and Li develop a deeper understanding of the female body and their sexual identities.
However, Chen and Zhang also differ from each other, especially in tone, as described by Xiao Zhiwei. Xiao compares and contrasts the two films in her review of *Xiu Xiu* (1999). She argues:

> the key difference is in tone. The dominant tone of *Sacrificed Youth* is one of sentimentality and nostalgia. It portrays the life of its character in a Dai village as a liberating and ultimately enriching life experience. *Xiu Xiu*, on the other hand, condemns the youth rustication movement in the strongest terms possible. The story that unfolds tells of the destruction of the life of a beautiful, innocent, and vulnerable young girl, the Xiu Xiu of the title. In making this girl’s story the centerpiece of her film, Joan Chen gives her denunciation of Mao’s radicalism deep emotional appeal. (Xiao 1812)

Here Xiao is right to note that Zhang is more nostalgic about the Cultural Revolution in *Sacrificed Youth* while Chen is very bitter and critical. Through Li’s stories, Zhang makes it clear that, although the Cultural Revolution is traumatic in nature, Li could not have been as mature as she is now without experiencing it. Clark also makes a good point in his analysis of Li as protagonist. He says, “As [Li] recalls at the end of the film, the Cultural Revolution was a time of great pain, and yet only through that experience has she gained a greater understanding of the world and herself” (188). 37

Unlike Zhang and her Chinese peers who tend to shy away from sexual exploitations of sent-down girls, Chen addresses this issue through a powerful critique. What she reveals in *Xiu Xiu* is not a fictionalized or an isolated case during the Cultural Revolution. When Xiu Xiu goes to have an abortion in a clinic, one of the nurses says to her colleague on their way out of the operating room, “she is the fifth abortion case this

37 This seems a dominant view among many former sent-down youths even today. 2008 is the 40th anniversary of the mass Sent-Down Movement and many former sent-down youths have revisited the countryside and reflected on their experiences. They generally agree that the years in the countryside are rewarding and educational.
week.” This clearly suggests that Xiu Xiu is only one of the many victims of sexual exploitations, but other Chinese filmmakers hesitate to step into a touchy territory to expose sexual violence during the Cultural Revolution. Joan Chen, however, manages to bring sexual violence experienced by sent-down girls into light in the cinema.

The Abused and Traumatized Sent-Down Body in Xiu Xiu

Cathy Caruth, a famous scholar of trauma theory in literature, claims that trauma “is never simply one’s own.” It is “implicated in each other’s traumas” (24). Michelle Balaev argues similarly that “the primary of place in the representations of trauma anchors the individual experience within a larger cultural context, and, in fact, organizes the memory and meaning of trauma” (149). She further argues:

> a massive trauma experienced by a group in the historical past can be experienced by an individual living centuries later who shares a similar attribute of the historical group, such as sharing the same race, religion, nationality, or gender due to the timeless, repetitious, and infectious characteristics of traumatic experience and memory. Conversely, individual trauma can be passed to others of the same ethnic, racial, or gender group who did not experience the actual event, but because they share social or biologic similarities, the traumatic experience of the individual and group become one. (152)

Caruth and Balaev make it clear that traumatic experiences, even though they are generally individual experiences, are also shared experiences. In the meantime, traumas are not necessarily remembered by individuals who experience them. They can be represented in fictional representations or recreated by those who do not experience them. The traumas in Xiu Xiu are narrated through a third voice because Xiu Xiu, the protagonist, is dead and voiceless. At the same time, Joan Chen, who is from Xiu Xiu’s
generation, never had any sent-down experiences in her own life, but she is able to represent what could have been her own life if she were sent down to the countryside. This cinematic and creative form of remembering not only reflects generational memories of certain historical experiences but also passes them on to those who share similar social, cultural, and political similarities with Xiu Xiu’s generation.

Chen’s film *Xiu Xiu* uses the Chinese female sent-down body to demonstrate consequences of a major political movement in China that inform human interactions according to political and ideological requirements. Its other title is from a Tibetan holiday, *Bathing Festival (muyujie)*. It is an annual holiday that lasts a week (July 6 -12 on the Tibetan Lunar Calendar). It is believed that water is especially pure and clean this week. Tibetans, therefore, bathe in natural springs or rivers, hoping to wash dirt and sins off their bodies and cure all diseases. The Bathing Festival is held outdoors and people bathe together naked. The bath is called Celestial Bath (*tianyu 天浴*) to describe the harmony and connection between nature and human beings. Families and friends sit together for tea or wine, and dance and sing after their baths.

Chen centers her film plot on Xiu Xiu’s bathing/washing scenes in three locations -- home, an outdoor concave, and a tent. Nonetheless, she complicates what appears to be her personal hygiene. It starts as a personal hygiene issue and soon becomes a way of washing away sins. At the end of the film, it is a means of transformation. Bathing then symbolically follows her tragic journey from a big city to the Tibetan steppes, from innocence to “impurity” (she uses her body to trade for a pass to go home) and then to death. The film inscribes political and historical meanings upon her vulnerable, abused,
and traumatized body. While audiences cannot make any generalizations by watching the film, they at least are aware of what atrocities female sent-down youths might have encountered through Chen’s particularized example of one young woman’s experience.

The film first introduces a bathing scene at home, where Xiu Xiu’s mother helps wash her before she leaves for the Tibetan steppes. After Xiu Xiu moves into Lao Jin’s tent, she has to wash her bottom everyday with the little water Lao Jin fetches from a river a few miles away. Nevertheless, it is hard for her to wash her entire body that itches a lot. Therefore, Lao Jin gives her a surprise one day by digging a concave on a small hill, which serves as a bathtub. Xiu Xiu happily washes her body while Lao Jin guards for her. At this point, Xiu Xiu is still pure and innocent and carefully cares for her own body. After being forced to have sex with the peddler for the first time, she cannot wait to wash her bottom, hoping to wash away the filth the rapist leaves inside her. After she is abandoned, however, she cares less about washing her body except when she has to prepare herself for another man. After Lao Jin shoots her at the end of the film, he moves her body to the concave where she first takes her celestial bath. Xiu Xiu’s bathing place turns into a grave. By using this central thread of bathing, Chen puts the female sent-down body in a historical context in which it is relentlessly traumatized and abused.

In “Feminism and Film: Critical Approaches” (2003), the Camera Obscura Collective argues that a film is “a dynamic process of the production of meanings, inscribed within the larger context of social relations. It’s a discourse and a social space through which various languages circulate and interact” (235-236). In Chen’s film Xiu Xiu, this social space is constructed through what Michel Foucault calls “docile bodies,”
which are “manipulated, shaped, [and] trained” (136) by the Communist Party and Mao Administration. In this social space “a machinery of power explores [the human body], breaks it down, and rearranges it” through disciplinary methods like administrative and economic techniques of control” (138). At the same time, docile bodies in a power discourse do not “exist neutrally because they cannot escape “physical locatedness in time and space, in history and culture” (Bordo 181). During the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese government put the body under political surveillance, believing that bodily obedience and sacrifice were crucial for social and political change to take place. Therefore, ownership of individual bodies belonged to the government, and Chinese people at the time took it for granted that they would be ready to die when needed and thus made the body political. It is in this general context that Chen uses Xiu Xiu to demonstrate how Chinese female sent-down youths undergo the government and the male control of their bodies in addition to sexual violence against their bodies during the Sent Down Movement (1966-1980) (shangshanxiaxiangyundong).

First off, Chen’s film opens with middle school students doing radio calisthenics to demonstrate how the government controls the body in the name of promoting physical fitness. Shortly after China was founded, body politics focused on, among other things, physical fitness for national interest and personal well-being. At the time, Chinese people’s average life span was approximately 38 and the Mao administration was aware of an urgent need to work on people’s health. After studying the national calisthenics published in Japan (1928) and the Soviet Union (1931), the Chinese government published its first version of mass radio calisthenics (Guang Bo Ti Cao) in 1951. It was
broadcast over the radio to almost all Chinese at home, in school, in the field, or at work. The radio calisthenics combines choreography, music, and body movements. It has a leading narrator to announce what move to make, what part of the body to stretch, and when to do it. The government required Chinese people from all walks of life to do radio calisthenics for about ten minutes every day (fig.1). As far as Chinese youths were concerned at the time, the government expected them to be healthy and physically fit so that they could become desired successors of revolution. Propaganda perpetuated their lives. The government published songs and posters to help school-age children remember the significance of physical activities including radio calisthenics (fig. 2).

**Fig. 1 and fig. 2 are removed because of copyright law.**

The opening scene in Chen’s film clearly demonstrates the political meanings of physical fitness and radio calisthenics. Xiu Xiu and many other students in her middle school line up in the playground doing the fifth version of radio calisthenics. A male narrator first recites one of Mao’s famous teachings: “Engage in physical activities, enhance physical fitness, remain vigilant, and defend the motherland.” He then announces, “The fifth version of radio calisthenics now begins.” Xiu Xiu and other students start to stretch or

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move their bodies in tune with the choreography he assigns.\textsuperscript{39} Although the scene is short, it shows how corporal obedience or discipline is represented through bodybuilding and is part of school children’s daily routine. It also shows how they internalize and abide by the government order. Therefore, Chen sets the tone for government control of individuals’ bodies at the very beginning of the film.

During the Cultural Revolution, the propaganda of self-sacrifice became an alternative form of the state control of the body. In the first three decades of Mao’s China, the Chinese government created a political rhetoric that individuals were expected to be relocated without hesitation, as they owed their existence to the Communist Party and the government. Propaganda emphasized to Chinese youths that it was the Communist Party that gave them a new and second life. Stories of many heroes and martyrs were used in the textbooks and feature films to exemplify sacrifice and heroism and therefore inspire the youths. Chinese youths learned at an early age that they were expected to sacrifice their bodies for sacred revolution at critical moments. Therefore, when the sent-down movement started, many urban youths deemed it an opportunity for them to prove their loyalty and commitment to Mao and his administration and were happily relocated in the countryside.

Chen’s film not only shows how the government expects Chinese youths to exercise their bodies but also demonstrates its ownership of their bodies. The film shows the quasi-militarization of sent-down youths and how the government disciplined young

\textsuperscript{39} Since 1951, there have been a few revisions of the first set of radio calisthenics with music. Currently, the eighth set is popular. At the same time, there are various forms of calisthenics for children and students in elementary, middle, and high schools. Obviously, the governmental interest in body building and individuals’ well being has not changed in the past fifty years.
bodies in the name of building socialism. In the film, these youths are assigned to
different squads as if they were in the army. They mostly wear green uniforms and hats
like real soldiers. At a public farewell gathering right before Xiu Xiu and her peers leave
Chengdu, they are seen to stand in line to get military coats and some accessories. They
will wear the same green color and join their squads before marching on to the Tibetan
steppes. The coat here is not only to help protect them from the cold weather but also to
turn them into disciplined and loyal soldiers. It is also at the gathering that a close-up
shows Xiu Xiu’s left hand with the red government seal imprinted on it. This scene
shows that Xiu Xiu is branded like an animal. The seal symbolizes the government
ownership of her physical being. Another close-up quickly captures Xiu Xiu’s confused
look at the red seal but she accepts it the way it is and goes to mingle with her peers
before their trip. It is the gathering that makes it official for the government to take the
sent-down youths away from their families. The mise-en-scène of the scene emphasizes
physical separation. Xiu Xiu and her peers are busy getting the military coat, having the
government seal imprinted on their hands, and jumping around with excitement, whereas
their parents and siblings stand in assigned areas, waving at them, and hoping to give
them a last word of care and love. Nonetheless, they do not have the slightest chance to
do so. Close-ups show families in tears the moment Xiu Xiu and other sent-down youths
get onto their buses or trucks and disappear in the distance. A farewell song sung by a
famous singer from Tibet is played in the background. It describes a lonely wild goose
flying alone in the Tibetan steppes. Ironically, the song foreshadows Xiu Xiu’s tragedy
towards the end of the film.
To ensure the permanence of sent-down youths’ relocation, the government also relocates their registered urban residence and transfers their residence to assigned villages or collective farms, making them illegal residents in their home cities if they return without the government approval. The household and individual residence registration system began after 1949, and ended in many provinces only in 2008. It restricted urban and rural residents to living in places of their origins unless the government arranged for their relocation. That is to say, relocation was almost impossible without approval. It was very difficult for urban residents to move to other cities and rural residents to move to cities. If residents migrated without approval, they would find themselves unemployed and would not have any benefits whatsoever. Their children also became illegal and could not officially enroll in local schools. Sent-down youths during the Cultural Revolution had their residence removed from the city and could not return home without proper paperwork. Under such circumstances, the film shows sent-down youths, such as Xiu Xiu, leaving the city with new residence paperwork and personally submitting them to the local government, knowing their chances of moving back were slim. When Xiu Xiu is eager to join her family in Chengdu after most of her peers are gone, she is unable to find anyone to help her obtain official approval. One character tells her to simply pack and leave the countryside, but she says that she cannot. She tells the character that she will be unable to get a job without proper paperwork with the imprinted seal from the local government. This means she will be illegal in her home city and have to take the consequences of unemployment. As a result, Xiu Xiu has to try all means to return to Chengdu, including trading her body for proper paperwork. Sadly enough, when the
government controls sent-down youths’ mobility, it also puts them, particularly young women, in danger because the female body is likely to become a site of power abuse and violence.

In “Maoist Mappings of Gender: Reassessing the Red Guards” (2002), Emily Honig points out that “Countless young women sent to live in the Chinese countryside were the objects of sexual abuse by local male officials (256). Liu Xiaomeng argues similarly in A History of Chinese Sent-down Youths (1998) that many female sent-down youths were victims of sexual harassment and rape during the Cultural Revolution. He says, “Female sent-down youths went to the countryside or the border areas for re-education and were unable to protect themselves and thus became vulnerable when faced with evil men in power” (303). His findings also indicate that men in power are more likely to rape or coerce female sent-down youths to have sex to trade for what they are promised to have. Most of these men were “local leaders who abused power when selecting sent-down youths to go to college, work in factories, or become party members” (Liu 308). They abused or impregnated many female sent-down youths, who either had abortions or attempted commit suicide, and some even killed themselves. Many of these men were executed after the Chinese central government implemented severe laws to punish sexual violence against sent-down youths. Nonetheless, it did not effectively stop this kind of violence. Liu further argues that “In Liaoning Province alone, among the 1300 crimes against sent-down youths between 1973 and 1976, 1130 cases were sexual assault of female sent-down youths, which is 86% of these crimes” (Liu 401).
Sometimes it is hard to distinguish rape or voluntary sex when discussing many cases of rape of female sent-down youths. While many female sent-down youths were rape victims, some of them chose to “[trade] their bodies for some privileges -- employment opportunities, college education, party membership, leadership positions, or return to the city,” according to Liu. He further notes, “Although this kind of behavior should be discouraged, powerless female sent-down youths had no other ways of leaving the countryside” (Liu 313). Therefore, they were forced to resort to certain behavior against their moral values in order to survive or move back to the city. In Red Sorrow: A Memoir (2001) Nanchu provides narratives that support Liu’s study. She points out that some female sent-down youths received promotions because of their relations to male leaders. She writes that one of her middle-school classmate Hua “had worked in the warehouse, where she recently became manager” while she “was not even admitted into the Communist Youth league” (105). Everyone knew at the time that this was “a job usually reserved for the elite Communist Party members” (105). She also writes:

As Hua’s belly got bigger and bigger every day, gossip about the company leaders’ sexual behavior spread further and faster than the northwest wind. Focus soon shifted from Yi to the deputy commander, Smallpox Lo, and other officials. (105)

Nanchu also writes that she “was the only city girl in the platoon still carrying the heavy building materials up to the high scaffolds during construction season and still blasting rocks on the mountain during winter” (106). Her story further exemplifies certain hidden rules female sent-down youths needed to follow if they wanted to receive promotion or other opportunities by giving what male leaders want -- their bodies. In a word, female
sent-down youths’ bodies during the Cultural Revolution were not only controlled by the government but also abused to the advantage of men in power, who were supposed to implement government policies.

Honig, Liu, and Nanchu provide a general historical context in which Xiu Xiu’s story is grounded. As discussed earlier, Chen’s film is one of the very few films representing individuals’ experiences during the Cultural Revolution with a focus on how female sent-down youths’ sexual experiences are manipulated. Moreover, she juxtaposes political control of the body and inhumane violation of the female body at that time. At the very beginning of the film, Xiu Xiu is already a girl undergoing adolescent changes and is a fully-grown young woman. When she does radio calisthenics, she attracts a boy’s attention for the first time in her life. This boy, who is also the narrator in the film, stands next to her and turns to look at her while stretching his body to the choreography. His voice-over tells the audience that he admires her beauty and has a crush on her. The same boy starts to court Xiu Xiu and gives her a kaleidoscope, but he has to stay in the city while Xiu Xiu becomes a sent-down youth. He stares at her back when she marches to her bus at the farewell gathering and that is his last look at her. Later on, he wonders what change it would have made if he had joined Xiu Xiu. Could Xiu Xiu have avoided her tragedy even with his presence? Somehow, he blames himself for being a coward and unable to protect Xiu Xiu. While his desire for Xiu Xiu comes from his sexual awakening during puberty and carries no political implications, it suggests that she is an object of male desire.
At the time of doing radio calisthenics, Xiu Xiu is clueless about this boy’s feelings. Although her body is fully developed, she does not know anything about desires and relationships. At the same time, sex education is not in the curriculum because the government promulgates puritanical abstinence and leaves no room to discuss sexual identities. Its censorship obviously leaves students in puberty more vulnerable and prone to unacceptable behaviors driven by sexual desires. This is what Xiu Xiu’s parents are concerned and worried about because they know they will not provide a haven for her while she is away. In a scene before Xiu Xiu leaves home, Chen uses close-ups and medium shots to demonstrate parental love and care. Her father is seen working on a sewing machine, making a few dudou -- traditional Chinese women’s intimate wear that resemble bras. He keeps saying, “I’m feeling sad,” while sewing both his love and care into the dudou. Xiu Xiu happily puts them on, saying they are nice and just her size to ease his worries. Her mother first helps bathe her in a big basin, with her younger sister helping get hot water. She washes Xiu Xiu’s hair, soaps her body, and even slaps her gently when she tries to stand up. After the bath, she sits on the bed, folding a pile of toilet paper for Xiu Xiu’s menstrual care (there are no feminine napkins at the time) and saying that the paper can last her for a few months. These scenes obviously exemplify her parents’ love and care for her. They also insinuate potential dangers for Xiu Xiu, who is physiologically mature with a fully developed body and menstruates. She has no clue that her body could be a site of lust, desire, and manipulation in places without adult or parents’ protection while she lives in the Tibetan steppes. Before leaving Chengdu, she does not know that her purity and innocence will soon end and that she will learn
“harsh lessons about the brutality of men in power” and “[roll] down the slope of degradation” (Corliss 1-2).40

In the remote Tibetan steppes, Xiu Xiu and her female peers have to receive re-education while protecting themselves from any forms of sexual harassment. Although desires are regulated and censored during political movements, they often overcome reason and contradict the party doctrine. Many men try every means to express desires and satisfy their sex drives. This is what happens when a patriotic film is screened in an open-door movie theater. Xiu Xiu and many other sent-down youths sit close to each other to watch Heroic Sons and Daughters (1964), a famous film celebrating heroism and martyrdom during the Korean War.41 The main male character is one of the millions of Chinese soldiers fighting the U.S. army. At one battle, he holds a Bangalore torpedo, jumps into a crowd of American soldiers, and kills many of his enemies while killing himself as well. He is praised for his heroic deed and glorious death. This goes in accord with the government call for sacrifice and loyalty. It is, however, at the climax of the film -- the protagonist holds the Bangalore torpedo -- that there is a power outage. This causes a commotion in the dark: one man touches Xiu Xiu’s body. Xiu Xiu flies into a rage, shouting, “Rascals, leave your claws where they were.”

This scene shows how patriotic education is sometimes overwhelmed by personal desires. While education of young people stresses eradication of personal desires and devotion to the revolutionary cause like the martyr in the film, the sent-down youths

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40 This is a quote from Richard Corliss’ essay “Joan of Art” published in Time Magazine on March 28, 1999.
41 The movie theater was a luxury during the Cultural Revolution. It was very common to screen films in an open space, even when it was scorching hot or very cold.
watching it apparently have other preoccupations. The scene also shows how Xiu Xiu, when standing up for herself and confronting the so-called “rascal” next to her, tries to keep her purity and integrity. Her anger, however, is not about some male sent-down youths’ blasphemy of communist ideals. On the contrary, she has an instinct to protect herself from harassment. It might also be her anger at someone who fails to follow a Chinese tradition, “men and women should keep a distance without direct body contact” if they are not spouses.

When there is no adult or even effective legal protection for sent-down youths, Xiu Xiu cautiously guards her own body and does not give men a chance to take advantage of her. For instance, even though she learns from a local leader that Lao Jin “is a good comrade” and has “no bad mark in the twenty years,” she is wary of any possible danger. When she realizes that she will have to share a tent with Lao Jin for about six months, she draws a curtain to hide her bed from Lao Jin’s view at night. Whenever she washes her bottom or feet, she uses the curtain for privacy. She watches Lao Jin’s each move in the tent to make sure that she is not in danger. When Lao Jin digs an outdoor bathtub so that she can bathe herself, she demands that he should sit far from her and not turn around while she washes herself. When she spends one night with Lao Jin after they fold their tent before moving again, she holds his rifle and puts one of her fingers on the trigger when she is asleep. These all demonstrate Xiu Xiu’s precaution as a young woman.

Nonetheless, not all female sent-down youths in the film Xiu Xiu confront men driven by desires and try to protect themselves from any harm. For example, shortly after
the film screening, one of Xiu Xiu’s female peers mysteriously disappears without a trace. Other sent-down youths look for her everywhere but her disappearance remains a mystery at the end of the film. Rumors circulate around her gender and sexual identity. She is said to have been abducted by a local man or been seen somewhere else with a child. There is also a rumor circulating that she eloped with her lover. What Chen conveys to her audience in this incident, perhaps like many other similar disappearances of female sent-down youths during the Cultural Revolution, is that possible violence against these youths is under the government radar screen and that is why desires prevail over discipline. At the same time, love and romance are restricted and sent-down youths have no right to love. Therefore, any unacceptable relationships are punished, which sometimes leads to death or elopement. Moreover, the despotic state during the Cultural Revolution undoubtedly makes it impossible to locate missing female sent-down youths, including Xiu Xiu’s missing peer. By creating the mysterious disappearance in her film, Chen demonstrates that female sent-down youths are more likely to become victims and points to many loopholes when it comes to female sent-down youths’ lives in the countryside.

Although Xiu Xiu tries to protect herself, she starts to “roll down the slope of degradation” in the web of desire and power (Corliss 2) six months after she learns horsemanship under Lao Jin. Because she is an exemplary worker, she is selected to learn horsemanship from Lao Jin for six months. Then she will lead a horsemanship team of female sent-down youths. She is bored and lonely while staying with Lao Jin and cannot wait to go back to the headquarters to join her peers. Nonetheless, nobody
shows up when she is supposed to leave. Every morning she dresses up, packs up, and waits outside the tent, but with no luck. One day a no-name male peddler passes by and sees her standing by the tent. Believing he is the one to pick her up, Xiu Xiu runs to him and asks him eagerly if she will go back to the headquarters with him. Although caught by surprise, the peddler sees an opportunity to satisfy his desires. He walks around Xiu Xiu, looking at her from head to toe. This is the second time in the film that Chen exposes Xiu Xiu to the male gaze. Unlike the boy from her school, who shyly looks at her while doing radio calisthenics, the peddler looks at her as if she were a prey. He tells Xiu Xiu that nobody is really interested in horsemanship any more as many of her peers who have “connections or money” have returned to Chengdu without her knowledge. He also tells her by saying, “pretty girls go as well.”

Instead of setting her mind on returning to the headquarters to lead the proposed female horsemanship team, Xiu Xiu is now desperate to leave the Tibetan steppes and join her family. However, she realizes that she has no connections at the headquarters to help her fulfill her dreams. At the time, there are several ways for sent-down youths to leave the countryside. First, they have to prove that they are true believers of communism and impress local party leaders so that they can go to college, join the army, or work in factories. Second, some sent-down youths have some connections or powerful parents and relatives to help them leave the countryside. Some other ways include health problems or family related issues (Liu 1998). As a result, sent-down youths tried every means to return to cities, which inevitably gave local leaders chances to abuse power. Under such circumstances, female sent-down youths were more likely to be victims of
abuse. Some of them were raped, or chose to trade their bodies for a pass to return to the city. Chen’s film is actually from a story of sexual abuse. In “Joan Chen: Guerrilla Director” (1999), Michael Sragow suggests that Yan Geling, the other script writer of Xiu Xiu, had a female friend “who traded her sexuality for a pass back to the city.” He also writes, “what she said stuck in [Yan’s] mind clearly -- ‘a woman who has no fear for rape has not fear for anything’” and this friend “had changed into somebody else -- damaged, very cynical” (6). Whether or not Chen recreates the same story, she uses Xiu Xiu to demonstrate the harsh realities she and many other female sent-down youths encounter -- they have to find a way of leaving the countryside. Xiu Xiu is caught in the web of playing political games and using her body to trade for her pass to go back to Chengdu. Her gender and sexual identities are inextricably linked to political control represented by a few men around her.

The peddler is obviously the first man that leads Xiu Xiu “down the slope of degradation” (Corliss 2). He reminds Xiu Xiu of the value of her body and implies that she can use it to return to Chengdu, her hometown. He says, “Pretty girls like you are using their wiles with party officials to get sent back to the city” and “anyone else with your face would have visited the ranch chiefs, the committee members, and called them uncles.” He makes it clear that her beauty is an asset that she can use to obtain a pass back home. It further proves how objectification of the female body provides a narrative that counters the party or the government promulgation of gender equality. The peddler also says, “I will get you what you need” and “Let’s go back to Chengdu together.” When Xiu Xiu asks him if he knows the local leaders well, he assures her by saying, “I
have an uncle at the headquarters,” and thus makes her believe that he is the only person of power to help her return to Chengdu. Lao Jin’s return, however, interrupts his intent and he has to leave the tent. Before leaving, he gives Xiu Xiu a big apple, which is a western illusion of forbidden fruit, sexual seduction, evil and sin. It is this apple, together with the second one given to her by another man, which symbolically triggers and expedites her degradation.42

The peddler returns a few days later. They are excited at the sight of each other. They hug and kiss each other, after which he drags Xiu Xiu to the tent and starts to undress her. Taken by surprise, Xiu Xiu tries to get his hands off her body but she soon gives in. In this scene, the peddler gets what he craves -- Xiu Xiu’s body -- while Xiu Xiu hopes to secure a pass back home by turning in her body to a man she has met only twice. In one way or another, she starts to think he likes her and they will leave the Tibetan steppes together. She waits for him to come back and patiently crochets a white collar protect for him (a very popular crochet product at the time). She seems to see a future for the peddler and her until another man shows up and completely shatters her hope one day.

It is a sunny morning. Xiu Xiu sits and crochets outside the tent. She suddenly hears some vague sound and sees a motorcycle appears in the distance. She is excited and runs to the man riding the motorcycle. He turns off the engine and walks to Xiu Xiu, wearing a mouth cover. Xiu Xiu quickly realizes that it is a different man after he removes the

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42 Chinese audiences who have no cultural or religious knowledge of Christianity will miss the point the apple is meant to make. Therefore, by using the apple in the film, Chen obviously targets western audiences, especially those who are Christians.
mouth cover. He says that the peddler cannot come and has asked him to help take care of her. Like the peddler, he also looks at Xiu Xiu from head to toe. He gives her an apple, drags her to the tent, and impatiently undresses her. Chen uses the silhouette reflected on the curtain in the tent to show that Xiu Xiu is like an object that is tossed around under the man’s hands and body. He gets up and leaves long after the sun sets and Lao Jin returns.

Xiu Xiu is a completely different person after the second man’s visit. This visit is a turning point in her life. She does not use the curtain anymore when she washes her bottom in Lao Jin’s presence. In so doing, she loses her complete innocence and is degraded into prostitution. After the third man leaves, she and Lao Jin fall out. Lao Jin yells at her for selling her body to those men whereas she argues back and breaks the kaleidoscope into pieces. In this scene, Lao Jin is seen to quietly burn one of the third man’s shoes. He is burning it with his anger while the man crawls over Xiu Xiu’s body in his presence. Even though the curtain is meant to block his view, he can still see the silhouette of two naked bodies. He, however, has no power to punish the man physically. He can only take revenge by burning one of his shoes. With the kaleidoscope gone, Xiu Xiu’s purity and innocence are gone as well.

Word soon spreads about a pretty city girl in the steppes being accessible and the tent is now a whorehouse instead of a safe haven guarded by Lao Jin. One man even possesses her body in Lao Jin’s presence. These men each delude Xiu Xiu with lies: “I have just sent two girls back to Chengdu,” and “One word from me, and they are home.” However, they enter the tent, undress themselves, and finally dress up and disappear.
without a trace. One after another, these men come to see Xiu Xiu, who imbibes their lies as easily as she has imbibed party indoctrination. She says, “The people who visit me are all very important,” “I have no money, no connection, and no powerful parents. What have I got by myself? And you cannot just sleep with this person and not with that person” because “the ones you do not sleep with will hold you back.” Her illusion of getting a pass back home through sex, however, eventually leads her to death rather than home. The way Xiu Xiu’s body is abused in an inhumane manner reflects how power is inscribed on the female sent-down body during the Cultural Revolution, when many Chinese men took advantage of vulnerable female sent-down youths but got away without punishment. Although the Chinese government implemented severe legal penalty for sexual violence, many cases were unnoticed.

Foucault argues in *Discipline and Punish* that “the body was object and target of power” and “in every society, the body was in the grip of very strict powers, which imposed on it constraints, prohibitions or obligations” (136). Although Foucault refers to the body in general, it is the female sent-down body that is “object and target of power” in Chen’s film *Xiu Xiu* because Xiu Xiu and many of her female peers are at the bottom of power dynamics and are at the mercy of abuse and violence inflicted upon them by Chinese men. Mao’s slogan that “men and women are equal now that we live in a different time in history” is only rhetorical in this situation. Feudalist patriarchy in Mao’s era complicated his agenda for gender equality, as male power was still dominant in many aspects of Chinese people’s lives.
Many Chinese people, however, did not seriously consider sexual abuse as a gender-specific crime at the time. Instead, they gave female victims, such as Xiu Xiu, zero tolerance. When violence against women occurred, it was more likely that victims were held responsible and blamed for seducing men and inviting violence. Although the Chinese government promoted gender equality and had laws penalizing rapists, the film shows that Xiu Xiu is considered promiscuous and a whore by people around her. She is held accountable for seducing those men. Rumors about Xiu Xiu must have been circulating at the headquarters. When Lao Jin takes Xiu Xiu to the headquarters to look for those men after she is pregnant, two women walk by and point at Xiu Xiu with a look of contempt. Two nurses in the clinic where Xiu Xiu has an abortion do not show any sympathy, either. As women themselves, they internalize and help reinforce gender expectations of Chinese women and participate in blaming Xiu Xiu for so-called fooling around. These are some comments they make before and after the abortion: “I’m sure she made a lot of sounds when she was screwing around. Now she is a dead pig.” “She would still want it.” They do not believe that Xiu Xiu deserves any respect when she has the abortion. As a result, they do not clean her up properly or treat her as they should, and they leave her alone in an operating room.

People around Xiu Xiu show this indifference to her experiences, which encourages further violation of her body. She is raped by a sent-down youth in the clinic. He shot three of his toes off in order to return to the city and is temporarily hospitalized. When learning that Xiu Xiu is in the operating room after her abortion, he quietly goes in and closes the door, which, however, wakes up Lao Jin who dozes off outside the room. The
audience cannot hear any sound from the room. We can only surmise that he rapes Xiu
Xiu when seeing him come out, buttoning up his pants. The disabled young man reduces
himself to a beast when penetrating an already wounded and scarred female body.
However, he is let go without any punishment after committing one of the worst crimes
against a woman. Lao Jin curses and tries to beat the rapist but is held back by a few
other men. Rape in the clinic relentlessly reveals how human nature is completely lost to
desires and male power. It also shows that an organized clinic harbors and tolerates
sexual violence, and turns it into an institutionalized type of crime.

The rape in the clinic, together with the abortion, destroys not only Xiu Xiu’s
body but also her hope to return home. Lao Jian carries her back to the tent. Her body is
weak and homesickness tortures her tremendously while she knows she is unable to join
her family any time soon.

Victimization and abuse of her body are not the results of Chen’s imagination.
Her portrayal of Xiu Xiu’s tragedies draws heavily on many sent-down girls’ historical
experiences. There has been a state silence about sexual repression and violence during
the Cultural Revolution and hard data on these matters are almost non-existent. There
are, however, some testimonies of repressed sexual identity during the Cultural
Revolution. For instance, Zhang Dening and Yue Jianyi note in Report on Love and Sex
among China’s Sent-Down Youths (1998) “tragic dimensions of sexuality” and find
“stories of severe sexual repression” (2). Honig also provides oral histories of repressed
love and censored romance. In “Socialist Sex: The Cultural Revolution Revisited”
(2003), she finds that it seems acceptable to publish oral histories of repressed sexual
identity. Sexual violence such as rape, however, is barely addressed. As discussed earlier, although there was a lack of public discourse on sex because of political concerns and state policing of sexual politics during the Cultural Revolution, sexism was still dominant while “sex was . . . performed in contexts not sanctioned by the state” (145). This means many sent-down girls during the Cultural Revolution were raped by their male leaders or forced to have sexual relationships with men in power so that they could leave the countryside.

Jenny Edkins argues in Trauma and the Memory of Politics (2003) that trauma “takes place when the very power that we are convinced will protect us and give us security become our tormentors: when the community of which we considered ourselves members turns against us” (4). Applying her argument to understanding the atrocity of violence against female sent-down youths’ bodies, we find it saddening that Mao’s rhetoric of gender equality is relentlessly challenged during the Cultural Revolution. In practice, it could not protect female sent-down youths from physical and psychological abuse by male leaders or other males without any administrative power. As a result, some of those abused chose to be silent; some chose to die; and some others had to marry those who abused them. All these provide inspiration for Yan and Chen to address female sent-down youths’ sexual experiences as part of the historical and political experiences of female sent-down youth during the Cultural Revolution, and Xiu Xiu’s tragedy is a shocking revelation of violence against these youths.

Chen’s film not only presents an extreme case of how the female sent-down body is abused and traumatized, but also demonstrates how a male’s sexual power is changed
after emasculation, which then changes gender power dynamics. In the film, the penis is deemed a locale of male power, without which a man is reduced to being inferior even to a woman. By portraying Lao Jin and his life as a castrated man, Chen’s film highlights that his manhood is deprived physically and symbolically. Lao Jin’s tragedy not only lies in his lack of male power but also loss of dignity because of that lack.

The driver who takes Xiu Xiu to Lao Jin’s tent tells her that someone cut off Lao Jin’s penis with a sharp knife in a Tibetan tribal war, making him lose “his manhood” and pee “like a woman.” He then chooses “to lead a solitary existence with a flock of wild horses, turning away from life and opportunity” (Poon 52). Like Xiu Xiu, Lao Jin also lives a sent-down life, miles away from any human touch. Deprivation of his manhood also deprives him of his dignity and opportunities of courtship. Although he always carries a rifle, which is interpreted as a symbol of masculinity and male power, it does not have any power of penetration in heterosexual relations. The film shows that those men who appear in the tent for Xiu Xiu ignore him, irrespective of the presence of his rifle.

Lao Jin is reticent, but immediately assumes responsibilities to take care of Xiu Xiu after she arrives. He “dedicates himself to her and ultimately acts as her redeeming angel” (Sragow 6). He fetches fresh water for her to wash herself each time a male visitor of Xiu Xiu leaves. He tries to reach out to Xiu Xiu with a touch of the soul and guards her closely. He silently watches the sex scenes but expresses his anger by, for example, burning one rapist’s shoes.

Once again, a man without a penis is not considered a real man because he is unable to penetrate a female body during intercourse. Historically man’s sexuality and
masculinity are inseparable from the penis. It is highly fetishized for its function of penetration. In Lao Jin’s case, as soon as he loses his penis, he becomes impotent and thus has no power whatsoever in front of other men and women. Poon states:

Petty tradesmen saunter into [Lao Jin’s] own tent to rape Xiu Xiu before his very eyes, he can only lower his gaze in regret. Even though he is armed to the teeth, and has no problems firing at people who came near his livestock, he does not dare to raise his rifles against those rapists. So powerful and entrenched is the exploitative system that he did not even think of challenging it. (52)

Poon implies that Lao Jin internalizes the traditional definition of manhood embedded in penetration. Without a functioning penis, he feels inferior to these men and is, therefore, voiceless. How can he challenge a system that traditionally identifies the penis with manhood and masculinity? Does he still have sex drive or desires without the penis? Is he still able to be in any relationships? In a word, does he have any dignity as a human being without the penis? In other men’s eyes, he is not a man in the real sense and that is why they openly challenge him by using and abusing Xiu Xiu’s body in his presence, including the sent-down youth who had mutilated himself. Although he is mutilated by losing a few toes, his relations to his manhood are not changed because he is still able to penetrate.

Lao Jin is challenged not only by these men but also by Xiu Xiu, who is empowered after seeing these “important men.” At the beginning of the film, she is aware of Lao Jin’s impotence, but she still treats him like a normal man who is still capable of harming a woman. Therefore, when she washes herself in the tent or in the

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43 Poon is not clear about the exploitative system in his statement.
natural bathtub Lao Jin digs for her, she tries to hide her body from his view. Nonetheless, she starts to bully him and order him around after she sees the second man. First, she starts to wash herself without using the curtain. Lao Jin is shocked at first but quickly turns his head away. She also demands that Lao Jin be friendly to the men coming to the tent. In one scene, she disrespectfully scolds Lao Jin for taking one of a man’s shoes and burning it. This pushes him to the limit. He gets into a rage and shouts out loud, “I said you are a whore.” Xiu Xiu, on the other hand, returns his anger by remaining cool, saying, “Not that you are getting any.” This conversation between Lao Jin and Xiu Xiu is illustrative of how she challenges his manhood. It makes it obvious that the presence of the penis and manhood are also related in the eyes of women. Its presence symbolizes power and masculinity whereas its absence can cause change in gender power dynamics.

The setting of Chen’s film is analogous to a hunting field in the wilderness, with Xiu Xiu as a prey in front of a few vicious hunting dogs. Her sexuality clearly produces the effect, and complicates female sent-down youths’ sexual experiences with politics and patriarchal perceptions of masculinity. In *Film as Social Practice* (1999) Graeme Turner argues, “The camera itself is an apparatus that embodies a theory of reality, an ideology” because “it sets out to construct a realistic world, to provide psychological depth for its characters, and to place itself within notions of real life” (14-15). He also argues, “film does not reflect or even record reality; like any other medium of representation it constructs and represents its pictures of reality by way of the codes, conventions, myths, and ideologies of its culture” (152). Following on Turner’s
argument, Chen’s film can be interpreted to reveal sent-down youths’ historical experiences inscribed upon the abused and traumatized sent-down body through fictionalized incidents.

The end of Xiu Xiu is somewhat fatalist in tone. It shows the powerless Xiu Xiu lying next to Lao Jin, dead. She is physically uprooted from her home city and never returns. She is a victim of those abusing a political power that is complicated by patriarchal perceptions of the female and the male body. Unable to fight back, she, together with Lao Jin, chooses to disappear from the world. The film uses an extreme case of abuse and violence against a female sent-down youth to demonstrate that the female sent-down body is objectified and sexualized in the context of the Cultural Revolution. Sexism and the Communist agenda together force many young female sent-down youths to compromise or sacrifice if they want to survive. Some even die because of humiliation, guilt, and societal pressures. In the meantime, masculinity is also related to sexual penetration and loss of it changes power relations. In “Socialist Sex: The Cultural Revolution Revisited” (2003) Emily Honig asserts that “Despite the proliferation of new, revisionist studies of the Cultural Revolution by both Chinese and Western scholars, the subject of sexuality -- and personal life in general -- has been completely ignored” (145). Chen’s film brings female sent-down youths’ sexual experiences into visibility, and she “has no illusions that [the Cultural Revolution] was anything but a difficult and turbulent time for China. But it was the rite of a passage of a generation, the same way the Vietnam War is lodged in the minds of America’s baby-boomers” (Schwankert 13). Xiu Xiu therefore, inscribes certain aspects of historical experiences of
a generation upon the traumatized gendered body as a way of remembering this rite of a
passage while still recognizing the turbulent nature of the Cultural Revolution.
Chapter 2  The Condemned and Transgressive Sent-Down Body in Memoir

In the preface of her memoir *Red Azalea* (1994) Anchee Min claims that the Cultural Revolution “brought destruction to every family in the nation” (xiii), and that her memoir “told the story of China, its yesterday, today, and tomorrow” (xiv). Although her claim is very bold, the book criticizes sexual discourses during the Cultural Revolution, and challenges the dominant heterosexual norm and Communist ideologies at the time. At the beginning of the book, Min tells her readers about her sexual awakening, and how she and her female lover Yan are both attracted to men. She reveals female lesbianism in the middle of the memoir, and ends her text in a manifestation of frantic sexual desires in public spaces such as bathhouses and parks. In the memoir, sexual desires or lesbian love represented through sent-down youths’ experiences question the political and patriarchal restrictions imposed on their bodies. By writing about punished heterosexual desires and her own sexual experiences of female eroticism during the Cultural Revolution, therefore, Min uses her and her peers’ sexual experiences to diversify Chinese immigrant women’s historical experiences. This also challenges ideological narratives of gender expectations and proper sexual behaviors during the Cultural Revolution.

Although female sent-down youths’ sexual experiences during the Cultural Revolution are among the most important experiences at the time, they are underrepresented in literary works in English by Chinese immigrant writers, including
women writers. Min (1957-) is perhaps one of the very few authors writing about different types of female sent-down youths’ sexual experiences, particularly lesbianism. Her memoir *Red Azalea* constructs the condemned and the transgressive female sent-down body, which adds two dimensions to the sent-down body, a term I attempt to develop and define in my project. The condemned female sent-down body encounters systemic punishment and organized public humiliation and ends in madness and death. The transgressive female sent-down body silently takes every opportunity to fulfill lesbian desires. This body subverts not only the state control of the sent-down body but also traditional heterosexual norms.

Using the condemned and the transgressive female sent-down body as two operating concepts of analysis, I draw on the history of sexuality in contemporary China to study how the female sent-down body conforms to social norms and societal pressures but also pursues transgressive relationships. Min’s use of these two types of the female sent-down body demonstrates that the sent-down body during the Cultural Revolution is a crucial site to negotiate individual desires and political agenda. I analyze the state control of sent-down youths’ pursuit of love and romance with the other sex and brutal physical or psychological punishments of the youths whose personal desires are incompatible with the government political agenda. I also examine ways sexual experiences are redirected among sent-down youths when they have few opportunities to interact with the other sex. Lastly, I discuss other forms of sexual experiences in public spaces such as bathhouses and parks.
Writing about the Sent-down Body as a New Sent-down Youth

The Chinese female sent-down body is politically and historically shaped and defined in relation to China’s sexology during the Cultural Revolution. In Min’s memoir, the sent-down body is, first and foremost, Min’s own body that is relocated in the United States. Her previous sent-down experience in China is still part of her life but her new sent-down experience in the U.S. enables her to write about herself in a way she could not while she was in China. She told Dean Nelson, a professor of journalism at Point Loma Nazarene University, in an interview on March 17, 2008:

I come to this country because I was going to die in China. So I come to this country so I can live…. The moment I became an American citizen, I felt that the only way I can give back to this country is to tell this country that I know, and I found a lot of people don’t know about China, and I found China is so crucial to America’s future. (Min 2008)

The statement explains why she writes about her coming-of-age experiences in China, particularly those during the Cultural Revolution. Although she and her works only reveal certain aspects of Chinese people’s lives in the Mao era, Nelson suggests that she is a writer who tells “the story of a country” . . . “through individuals’ eyes.” Min, however, had no intention to write about stories of China when she first attempted to

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44 Previous sent-down youths who moved to the United States after the Cultural Revolution describe this as neo-sent-down movement (yang cha dui).
write about her own life, but she admitted in the interview that she suddenly realized that she had been “writing about China” and “there is a plot” about national identity in her works. *Red Azalea* evolved from what Min wrote in an ESL (English as a Second Language) writing class she took shortly after she arrived in the United States. This book, together with a few others by Min, has made her a well-known Chinese immigrant woman writer. Some of her works use contemporary China and her historical experiences to tell her readers what China and its young people’s lives were like when she grew up.\(^46\) They open a window into a history of which many people outside China have little knowledge.

Min is very bold to represent lesbianism and various sexual activities in public spaces in her memoir. While there is surprisingly sparse literature in and outside China on the two topics, she demonstrates her efforts to reclaim those experiences and provide a different lens for sinologists and historians to study contemporary Chinese sexology, history, and gender related issues.

Like some of her contemporaries living in the United States, Min was born in Shanghai. She was a sent-down youth on Red Fire Farm near the East China Sea during the Cultural Revolution.\(^47\) While working on the farm, Min was selected by the Shanghai Film Studio to audition for the leading role in a propaganda film about the life of Mao


\(^{47}\) Joan Chen, Anchee Min, and Wang Ping are all from Shanghai. Many visual and literary works of the Cultural Revolution are produced by Chinese from Shanghai, Beijing, and a few other big cities. This is an interesting phenomenon, as it might lead to questioning certain limitations of these works’ representations.
Zedong’s wife, called *Red Azalea*. Unfortunately, she did not get the role. Nevertheless, the film was never released because Madame Mao, who was charged with leftist political practice, was arrested after Mao’s death in September 1976. Min was considered part of Madame Mao’s “political trash” (to use her own words in the interview) and made to work as a set clerk and cleaner in the studio for about eight years, copying scripts, mopping floors, or fetching hot water for staff. She told Dean Nelson that she was punished to the point that she “wanted to kill” herself. In 1984, Min’s friend Joan Chen, whom she met in the Shanghai Film Studio, suggested that she move to the United States on a student visa to further her education. At first, she intended to attend the Art Institute of Chicago, but was sent to the University of Illinois to take ESL (English as a second language) classes before she was officially admitted into a degree program. She stayed at AIC from 1985 to 1990 and eventually earned her B.F.A. and M.F.A. in Fine Arts.

Min’s memoir represents historical, political, and cultural experiences focusing on punished coming-of-age desires, lesbianism and sexual activities in public spaces. Although one would think individuals should have the freedom to write about their own lives during the Cultural Revolution, Min said it was more unlikely to write about hers when she was in China. She told Nelson that “Self-censorship stopped [her] from writing about sexuality,” and she was only able to write about it in the United States. Therefore, she said, the book is a

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48 Although she did not get the role to play Madame Mao, Min published *Becoming Madame Mao* (2001), a historical fiction about Madame Mao’s life.

product of an American education. As a *New York Times* bestseller in 1995, it has been translated into more than twenty languages.

**Interpreting Red Azalea: Rethinking “Transnational”**

Although transnational feminism has been a useful analytical frame in many disciplines, studies of its relationships with women’s literary representations are limited. Studies by Constance Richards (2000), Shirley Lim *et. al.* (2006) and Susan Strehle (2008) are perhaps representatives of scholarly efforts to use a transnational feminist frame to analyze literature. Richards’ study integrates postcolonial theory with a transnational frame to discuss gender, race and national origin by examining works by Virginia Woolf, Alice Walker, and Zoë Wicomb. Lim and her colleagues provide a general study of where transnational Asian American literature is located. They use thirteen essays that discuss works by, for instance, Maxine Hong Kingston, Ha Jin, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Karen Tei Yamashita, to explore ways of understanding the transnational aspects of Asian American literature. Strehle’s study of transnational women’s fiction focuses on women’s writings published in Australia, Canada, India, Nigeria, Puerto Rico, and the United States between 1995 and 2005, but “transnational” for her means “the overlaps and reverberations among texts from different lands” (4). These studies exemplify academic efforts to apply a transnational feminist frame to interpreting literary works. How is a transnational frame relevant to Min’s memoir?
Wendy Somerson (1997) is the first and the only critic that explicitly uses “a transnational frame” (98) to read the memoir, and reads it as “a transnational text” (99). She criticizes Grewal and Kaplan for failing to include homosexual formations in feminist transnational theorizing and claims that her reading of Min’s memoir links “constructions of sexuality to flows of power and capital” (99). She says:

[Min’s] text works particularly well as both transnational and feminist because she is writing from the space of the U.S. about gendered sexuality in China. Through her translation of the Chinese Cultural Revolution into a story told in English for the “West,” Min negotiates a space of resistance. . . . Crossing “West” and “East,” Min’s story refuses classification as purely “Chinese” or “American,” but instead articulates a specific interstitial space on the borderland of discourse between the two countries. (100)

Somerson’s “transnational frame” follows the transnational feminist understanding of the flow of Western power and global capital. For her, this helps decode “Min’s story of survival and recodes it in exchange for American money” (102). Here Somerson makes efforts to put Min’s memoir in a transnational frame with an emphasis on “the flow of power and capital.” She emphasizes that “Min’s text implicates the U.S. as a productive force in the Cultural Revolution because the U.S. reception of [it] fetishizes China as the space where time moves backwards” (103). Therefore, Somerson claims that Min has to negotiate with Orientalist constructions of China to produce her text within a ‘Western’ frame” (105).

Somerson’s use of “a transnational text” is somewhat problematic. Min’s memoir is not transnational simply because it writes about gendered sexuality in China in English and is published in the United States. Somerson only explains the transnational aspect of the book at the production level without rationalizing what is in the book that makes it a transnational text.
Somerson also argues that the West is implicated within Min’s narrative “through China’s construction of itself against ‘Western’ capitalism/imperialism” (particularly American imperialism). With this frame in mind, she finds clues in the book to prove that “the U.S. became part of China’s definition of its own boundaries” (106) between the Communist agenda and the Western perpetration. While she is correct when proving her point by finding these clues, we should also be aware that Soviet Revisionism, some Chinese people’s reactionary behaviors and thoughts, and feudalism also play a role in China’s definition of a national identity (a few major political movements demonstrated the Communist Party’s determination to fight these forces). Therefore, the Chinese government at the time led its people to battle different forms of ideologies in addition to imperialism and capitalism.

Somerson also applies queer theory to her transnational analysis of Min’s memoir. Queer theory is relevant to interpreting the text because it opens up possibilities to reconsider P.R. China’s heteronormative discourse and helps recuperate fluid sexual experiences during the Cultural Revolution. Somerson agrees with queer theorists that sexual identities are socially constructed, but her interpretation of China’s social production of female desires seems somewhat limited. She argues, “through its promotion of strong roles for women, [China] inadvertently created a space of desire

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51 Before P.R. China was founded, the Communist Party and the Nationalist Party under Sun Yet Sen emphasized battles against imperialism, feudalism, and colonialism. Although China was not completely colonized, it was invaded by Britain, the United States, Germany, France, Tsarist Russia, Japan, Italy, and Austria towards the end of the Qing Dynasty (1616-1912). Each of them established a concession in major cities in China and left around 1949.

52 Min’s book also mentions that she participated in criticizing feudalism and reactionary behaviors, but Somerson fails to include this in her analysis. Although it is impossible to conduct analyses on all these levels when discussing Min’s memoir, Somerson purely highlights the role the West plays in China’s construction of a national identity. Her application of transnational feminism regarding flows of capital and power is somewhat ethnocentric.
between women” (109). Here she seems to link female desires for each other with Mao’s new rhetoric of gender equality. That is, women are de-gendered, desexualized, and “masculinized on the official level” (109). In Somerson’s analysis, therefore, suggests that female desires for each other are closely related to the political call for “strong roles for women” so that China is posited “as a strong country that could compete with ‘the West.’” This “inadvertently [creates] a space of desire between women” (109). However, Mao’s promotion of strong women in China primarily aimed to overthrow powers of clan, patriarchal control, and family duties (zuquan, fuquan and fuquan 族权，父权，夫权), which are symbolically called “three big mountains on Chinese women’s backs.” In this sense, then, the image of iron women is not a precondition for female desires for each other, as Somerson suggests.

While some aspects of Somerson’s analysis are limited, she provides a useful direction for me to use a transnational perspective to examine Min’s memoir. I argue that Min, together with other Chinese writers on similar topics -- sexual desires and homosexuality -- (I will discuss these writers later in the chapter), reclaims sexual experiences that are undermined in representations of the Cultural Revolution. Min’s representation of her and her peers’ sexual experiences, not exclusively lesbianism, helps make homosexuality and practice of desires visible in literary works about the Cultural Revolution in China and the United States in the 1990s. Her ties to China, Chinese history and culture, and the United States, are multiple in dimension and location.

In the meantime, transnationalism is epistemologically and methodologically a way of interpreting texts or various social and cultural relations. The transnational
aspect of Min’s memoir should provide a lens we use to interpret it as well as what material conditions make its publications possible. I propose that the sent-down body in Min’s memoir and its embodiment of cultural and historical memory invites a transnational perspective on three levels. First, Min is a displaced author from China. Her memoir is inextricably linked with a recent history that defines who she was but also who she is as a new immigrant, and this history automatically becomes a part of contemporary Chinese immigrant history. Second, the sent-down body physically and symbolically moves across geopolitical, geocultural, and historical boundaries, and demonstrates multiple linkages with different sexual identities, which are reconstructed after the sent-down body is uprooted again but this time in a more liberating context. Third, a transnational perspective also allows readers to reconsider, through Min’s representations of her and her peers’ experiences inscribed upon the sent-down body, how to apply a transnational frame to similar works by other immigrant women.

My project is interested in how Min, by standing on the other side of the Pacific Ocean, retrospectively projects her historical experiences upon the condemned and transgressive sent-down body during the Cultural Revolution. As discussed in my Introduction, a transnational perspective engages “an analytic set of methods” (Hofmeryr 1444) and allows for explorations of interconnected and discursive movement (physical and symbolic) in multiple locales. It opens up “broader analytical possibilities for understanding the complex linkages, networks, and actors in the global South” (Hofmeryr 1444). Applied to Min’s memoir, it helps illustrate how the Chinese female

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53 Not all literary texts can be interpreted through a transnational perspective.
sent-down body in movement and in diaspora embodies repressed and transgressive memories when it is defined and redefined in relation to contemporary China’s politics, history, and culture.

The Condemned and Transgressive Female Sent-Down Body

The condemned body is a term derived from Michel Foucault’s study of the history of prison. The body is condemned and punished if it breaks legal, political, and social constraints. Punishment of the human body, therefore, has social and political meanings, because the condemned body is “caught up in a system of constraints and privations, obligations and prohibition” (11). Punishment of the body has social and political implications if it is examined in relation to “power and domination” since “the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body” (26). In *The History of Sexuality* (1990), Foucault further elaborates the relationship between sexuality and power relations. He argues that sexuality is a social construction that exists within a particular cultural context, and its meanings or definitions are culturally and historically specific. He argues, “if sex is so rigorously repressed, this is because it is incompatible with a general and intensive work imperative,” and it also “becomes legitimately associated with the honor of a “political cause” (6). In *Red Azalea*, the condemned sent-down body illustrated by the characters Little Green and her male lover is not punished for violating any written laws. It, however, is required to be “a subjected body.” Otherwise, it is punished for expressing sexual desires that confront the Communist Party’s expectations of sent-down youths: serve the country.
wholeheartedly and sacrifice their lives when needed. Therefore, the sexual discourse is controlled by a political agenda that denies the personal well-being and represses sexual desires.

However, a study of the condemned sent-down body is flawed if it fails to consider the gendered nature of the sent-down body. Although Foucault provides a useful frame to examine the condemned body in *Red Azalea*, the bodies in his analysis are “pragmatically male ones” (Arthur & Grimshaw 2). To quote Liu Xiaomeng again, no study of sent-down youths would be possible without examining female sent-down youths’ experiences, because they encountered more hardships and violence. Feminist and cultural studies scholars Jane Arthur and Jean Grimshaw (1999) acknowledge Foucault’s contribution to the study of the body, but they also attempt, like many other feminist theorists and scholars, to introduce women’s experiences into body politics. Moreover, they challenge Foucault’s static condemned bodies by suggesting that the female lesbian body is not only the disciplined body but also the transgressive body. In their view, the lesbian body is both the Foucauldian “productive” and “subjected body” (Foucault 26) and the “active desiring [subject]” -- the transgressive body-- from a feminist standpoint (Arthur & Grimshaw 15).

The condemned, gendered and transgressive body drawn from Foucault and Arthur & Grimshaw provides a focal frame to analyze how sexual discourse during the Cultural Revolution is addressed in *Red Azalea*. The focus not only helps explain how the gendered body is condemned, policed, and punished when female sent-down youths
attempt to fulfill their desires but also explains how transgressive desires become possible and challenge heterosexual norms during the Cultural Revolution.

The condemned and punished sent-down body in this chapter, as discussed earlier, draws on Foucault’s study of the prison. Like the condemned and punished body in prison, the sent-down body is also punished, but for engaging in heteronormative relationships when sent-down youths (many were teenagers) were required to focus on re-education in the countryside and were not encouraged to date the opposite sex or get married before they reached the age of legal marriages. Even though the sent-down body is punished, it is also transgressive when its desires are directed toward the same sex, as Min’s memoir demonstrates. These two types of the sent-down body are significant in Min’s representations of her and her peers’ sexual experiences that are regulated and defined by sexual discourse and political concerns in the Mao Era.

**Sexual Discourse in the Mao Era**

China in the Mao era (1949-1976) regulated Chinese people’s private lives in order to comply with the Communist Party’s call for practicing politically correct and acceptable relationships. From cities to the countryside, Chinese people had to marry those who matched them in political and class status. Otherwise, they would be denounced, or would put their own careers in danger. In many work places, party leaders looked into couples’ background (similar to background check) before stamping their application for marriage certificate with a red seal. Chinese people were, therefore, alienated from their own bodies under the state pressure. They had to conform to the
political agenda by censoring their own desires for fear of punishment. British sinologist Harriet Evans examines the sexual discourse in China and says:

> Attention to matters of love and sex was for decades treated either as the shameful expression of a warped mind or as evidence of bourgeois individualism and detrimental to collective welfare …. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the slightest suggestion of sexual interest was considered so ideologically unsound that gendered tastes in hairstyle and dress were coerced into a monotonous uniformity of shape and color. (1-2)

Although there was a public silence about sex and sexual experiences, heterosexuality was still considered one of the social and cultural norms. Chinese people were still able to pursue heteronormative love relationships to produce more revolutionary successors under the new marriage law introduced in 1950. Moreover, Evan’s emphasis on the relationship between the sexual discourse and power relations in the Mao Era provides a specific context in which Min’s readers can interpret her representations of historical experiences through the female sent-down body.

Desires and sexual experiences in the Mao era were framed and shaped by socialist ideologies as well as deep-rooted Chinese feudalist traditions and values. Some studies, however, hold only the Mao administration accountable for collective silences in sex and sexuality and control of personal desires. In Sex and Sexuality in China (2006) Elaine Jeffreys draws on a news article in USA Today on Sept. 16, 2003 to conclude that “sex was open and free in traditional China, but all that stopped when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came to power in 1949” (2). The news article describes the Mao era as one that “stamped out prostitution and enforced a puritanical public morality that regarded individual desire as a bourgeois indulgence.” The article says, “Today’s
Chinese revolution is sexual.” This is a superficial interpretation of China’s changes in all occupations after the Cultural Revolution, because the sexual dimension of Chinese revolution in the post-Mao era is closely related to globalization and the development of consumerism in China. Jeffreys uses the description in the article to argue:

Under the leadership of Chairman Mao Zedong (1949-1976), sex practically vanished from sight in Chinese culture. The Communist regime enforced a ‘puritanical public morality that regarded individual desire as bourgeois indulgence’, with the result that men and women dressed in androgynous conformity, premarital sex was virtually unknown, and commercial sex was banned. (2)

Although both Jeffreys and her news source are right about the collective silence in sex and sexuality, and desires in the Mao era, they analyze sexual politics only at face value and provide reductive statements. They argue that the Communist regime silenced any open discussions of sex, but sex was not openly discussed before Mao took power and sex content in media or publications is still highly controlled in current China. In the meantime, heterosexual activities did not lag after P. R. China was founded in 1949. One possible indicator of active sex is the birth rate before family planning was implemented in the early 1980s (although not all sexual activities result in pregnancy). For instance, the birth rates between 1949 and 1970 all exceeded 30 per 1,000 population (except 1959 and a few other years without statistics), while the birth rate in the three years after the Cultural Revolution was less than 20 per 1,000 population, and “The official figures show a net increase of over 440 million between 1949 and 1980” (Aird 268-269).

What is often lost in many discussions of sexual experiences in the Mao era is that

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Chinese traditions, religious perceptions of sexual practices, and deep-rooted feudalist ideologies did not completely give way to communist ideologies. Therefore, there was a combination of feudalism, traditions, and totalitarianism that complicated sexual politics between 1949 and 1976. Julia Kristeva observes in *About Chinese Women* (1977) that Confucianism constitutes a solid “base for the construction of a rationalist morality with a strong paternal authority and a complex hierarchy” in China (70). For instance, premarital sex was strongly discouraged and despised even before Mao took power. Chinese traditions did not tolerate premarital sex, and brides were expected to lose their virginity only on their wedding night (a bride had to use a white bedding sheet, shed blood during her first intercourse, and showed it to the groom’s family). Even if some dared to have premarital sex, they would keep it unknown, as they did not want to disgrace their families or be stigmatized. Therefore, silence about premarital sex is not unprecedented in Chinese history.

Jeffreys connects eradication of prostitution with the Communist regime’s puritanical public morality in her statement, which incorrectly interprets the disappearance of prostitution for three decades in the Mao era. In “Female Sex Sellers and Public Policy in the People’s Republic of China” (2006) Zhang Heqing explains:

Following its accession to political power in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) announced to the world that it would resolutely eliminate the system of prostitution in China. Consequently, on 21 November 1949, all the brothels in Beijing were closed down during the course of one evening. . . . Over the next few years, the newly established People’s Republic eradicated the several-thousand-year-old system of prostitution in China. (142)
Zhang’s findings confirm that the Mao administration was determined to eliminate prostitution that had oppressed Chinese women for centuries. They also prove that Jeffreys’ incorrect rationalization of the disappearance of prostitution in P.R. China.

The Mao administration not only terminated prostitution but also wanted to control STDs spread through prostitution. Mao announced that P. R. China would not tolerate prostitution, and prostitutes should live a new life for their own good. Thousands of brothels were closed in the early 1950s, and prostitution vanished for thirty years until after the Cultural Revolution. One of the direct results was that many STDs, such as syphilis and gonorrhea, disappeared in the 1960s and 1970s, and many medical schools did not even teach their students about STDs anymore (Wang 110). Although prostitution revived in the 1980s, and is now common in China, it is still banned and highly policed today.

What is also lost in discussions of sexual experiences in the Mao era is the history of socialism and its role in China’s sexual discourse. The state policing of sexual activities was also a continuation of abstinence traditions of the nineteenth-century Utopian Socialism in Europe. In From The Cultural Revolution To Reform (2008), Zheng Qian defines abstinence as “a means of perfecting morality or fulfilling certain ideals by denying individuals’ desires for material goods.” For him, abstinence was widely practiced in the early socialist history in Europe, and it is “a means to mobilize the great masses to fight existing systems,” and denies “any pursuit of personal happiness” (61). After China was founded in 1949, the Mao administration continued to inspire and

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sustain Chinese people’s passion for revolution. It believed that desires for material goods were incompatible with the party philosophy and principles of *jiankupusu* (work hard and live a plain life) could lead to revisionism that would put the new socialist system at risk. The administration went to extremes to promote a puritanical life style and demanded control of desires for material goods, which also extended to other aspects of Chinese people’s lives, including their sexual experiences. Therefore, abstinence in the Mao era was based on denying anything that is materialistic and anything that contradicts the Utopian socialist ideals, i.e., of carrying on revolution without considering personal interests. It was also pushed to extremes during the Cultural Revolution, when the masses were mobilized to watch one another and practice strict self-censorship as well.

In the first decade of the Mao era, the political dimension of sexual activities was associated with reproductive functions of the body. In the 1950s, women were considered “heroic mothers” (a term borrowed from the former Soviet Union at the time) if they had more children. The more children a couple had, the more money the government gave to them to cover expenses of raising the children, and heterosexuality was considered a norm for that purpose, even though it was not openly discussed.

Homosexuality, while it was popular in Chinese literature for centuries, was absent from the public view in P.R. China, leaving many Chinese people to believe (even after the Cultural Revolution) that homosexuality is not only a Western decadent

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56 Lesbian experiences were detailed in literary works in the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) Dynasties. Documents of gay experiences appeared as far back as the Shang Dynasty (1766-1050 BC). Xiaoli Liu, a researcher at Institute of Research on Sexuality and Gender of Renmin University of China, provides a detailed history of Chinese lesbians in her essay “Why Is There A Lack of Lesbian Studies” (March 24, 2007). The essay can be accessed at <http://www.sexstudy.org/article.php?id=2826>. Web. 7 July, 2009.
behavior but also a medical problem. In a report on the treatment of homosexuals in China (2001), U.S Immigration and Naturalization Services makes the following statement: “Homosexuality is heavily referenced in ancient Chinese literature, and gay culture in China dates to the beginning of Chinese civilization” (2). It also notes that, “since 1949, in an ironic reversal China, as part of the process of modernization, [chose] to abandon traditional attitudes for the historical Western view of homosexuality as a perversion” (2-3). Similar findings also appear in sexologist Sang Tze-lan’s The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex in Modern China (2003):

Total silence regarding homosexuality did not fall on China, however, until after Mao’s takeover. After the Communist Revolution of 1949, the Republican discourse on homosexuality was largely erased from the public arena. Literature and the arts avoided the category homosexuality for several decades, for there are practically no artistic representations touching on it from the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Nor did the official sex-advice material make any mention of homosexuality. (27)

In her own research on the Mao Era, Sang also finds “only one post-1949 publication that discussed homosexuality and other sexual variations openly -- but only as perversions” (163). This means, “the term same-sex love became unmentionable, an abomination, and disappeared altogether from circulated print” (164). Sang’s study points to the public silence about homosexuality in literature, works of art, and media.

Harriet Evans also observes an official silence about homosexuality and its impact on the public view. She says:

official silence masked a widespread view of homosexuality as a violation of the natural heterosexual order, a sexual perversion caused by sickness or psychological abnormality. In a context characterized by popular and

official evasion of public discussion about homosexuality, homosexuals have become ‘spectres’ (youling) floating around in contemporary Chinese society. (206-7)

Given the fact that same-sex relationships were strictly censored, measures of punishment were also extreme. According to Wang Geya (2009), homosexual behaviors during the Cultural Revolution were considered a type of crime that led to persecution, including detention, fines, and discipline in a labor camp. Taiwanese sexologist Ruan Fang-Fu describes in *Sex in China: Studies in Sexology in Chinese Culture* (1991) that “After the founding of the People’s Republic of China on October 1, 1949, a strict ban on erotic fiction and sexually explicit materials of any kind was imposed nationwide” (98). He also notes:

prohibitions against homosexuality are especially strong in contemporary China. Gay men are frequently punished and understandably reluctant to reveal their identities. As a result, it is extremely difficult to obtain any realistic and objective information on gay life in China. These problems are exacerbated by the fact that, since the regime’s inception in 1949, objective information on homosexuality has been almost completely unavailable in the People’s Republic of China. (121)

Renowned Chinese sexologist Li Yinhe examines the legal status of gays and lesbians in contemporary China. She states in “The Legal Status of Gays and Lesbians in China” (2006) that the Cultural Revolution is a unique historical period for gays and lesbians. When they were found out, they were subject to harsh treatment or punishment. “Some gays were charged with hooliganism for having anal sex” (ji jian) and “any homosexual behavior led to the party discipline or administrative sanctions (such as wage deduction).

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58 This is a journal essay entitled “On The Legal Policies of Gay Marriages.” It was published in *Gansu Social Studies*, Vol. 1, 2008.
... In homosexual relationships, the parties on the receiving end were not punished as severely as those on the giving end.” Li further observes that all those measures of punishment had no legal basis. 59

In Love and Sexuality of Chinese women (1998), Li Yinhe interviews 47 Chinese women with a great age difference (from 29 to 55). In the chapter on female same-sex experiences that uncannily resembles those in Red Azalea, she reveals that female eroticism during the Cultural Revolution existed by using an interviewee’s voice:

I first heard of lesbians when I was a sent-down youth on a farm. One of them was more feminine, and petite. She was a high-school graduate; the other was a Tomboy, strong and heavy. She only finished middle school. They were very close. One day, a tall, heavy and ugly female sent-down youth on our farm told me: the two girls had sex (jiaopei). I blamed her for talking rubbish, but she said that they had sex like a man and a woman. We had mosquito nets on the farm in the summer, but they were just too small. The two of them tried all means to sleep under on mosquito net and covered their bodies with one blanket. While one was bathing, the other would sit there watching, and sometimes they shared one bucket of water to wash themselves. I said, don’t you think it’s too unhealthy to share the water? They smiled back at me, without a word. One time, one of them joined us for a performance rehearsal and came back late. The other one came to look for her, and said something that made us feel that they were like husband and wife. I did not find anything wrong in their relationship. When it was difficult to find a lover of the opposite sex, it was wonderful to have someone like you, right? (218)

This story shows that same-sex experiences did exist in a subtle way, at least among sent-down youths. Even though all sex was a taboo, it was practiced and performed in reality, including sex between same-sex youths. It also points to the fact that some sent-down youths’ desires were redirected to same-sex relationships (or at least justified and

understood in this way) because “it was difficult to find a lover of the opposite sex,” according to the interviewee. What makes this story even more interesting is its similarity to Anchee Min’s narratives of female eroticism in *Red Azalea*.

Desires and sexual experiences in the Mao era assumed political and traditional meanings. On the one hand, they were informed and shaped by communist ideologies that prioritize collective and political interests over personal happiness and desires. They also reflect the Mao administration’s determination to counter bourgeois ideologies and life styles. On the other hand, Chinese feudalist traditions also helped define what proper desires and sexual behaviors were acceptable at the time. Therefore, the sexual discourse in the Mao era was more complicated than some Western studies have explained.

Sent-down youths’ experiences in this discourse are also complicated. While these youths’ sexual identities were defined in the Mao China that promoted gender equality and a politically correct heteronormative love relationship, these young people did not have the freedom to express their desires. Those who did were accordingly treated as politically incompatible and then punished. This is what Foucault names as the condemned body.

**Sexual Discourse of the Sent-Down Body**

Sent-down youths’ desires and sexual experiences were policed in the name of revolution when the youths worked in the countryside or on the farm. Millions of them learned to sacrifice personal desires in their formative years in order to focus on building socialism and proving their revolutionary devotion. They also learned to practice self-
censorship in addition to being alert to their peers’ sexual behaviors. Although the government allowed them to engage in romantic relationships, get married, and settle down in the countryside, love and relationships came with a price for many of them.

Thomas Bernstein, Liu Xiaomeng and Chinese American historian Yihong Pan (a former sent-down youth) provide a context to understand sent-down youths’ love and romance. In *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages* (1977), Bernstein explains that sent-down youths’ marriages were facilitated so that they could adapt to rural life. He writes:

> Marriage of a UY to a local person can be said to constitute a complete form of integration into the village. Marriage among UYs would seem to promote adaptation in that it entails settling down to a stable life. However, official approval has been given only since 1973. Previously, the predominant approach was that the UYs should be advised to postpone marriage. (161)

In *The History of Chinese Zhiqing* (1998), Liu analyzes the party policies regarding sent-down youths’ marriages. He explains that at the peak of the sent-down movement, sent-down youths “were expected to get married and settle down in the countryside in their entire lives,” but “they were expected to marry late” (501). On June 26, 1969, *People’s Daily* called for the sent-down youths to have late marriages, ideally at the age of 25 or 28, and connected courtship and marriage with the party’s political agenda. As can be seen, Liu bases his analysis on party policies regarding sent-down youths’ marriages while they received re-education in the countryside. He also notes that sent-down youths working on the farm encountered more discipline than those working in villages. For instance, construction and production platoons were more likely than villages to promote
Puritanism. “In the early years, relationships were a taboo” as they “were deemed bourgeois,” and punishment would be inflicted if sent-down youths were found in relationships (Liu 509). However, punishment did not stop many sent-down youths from engaging in sexual activities. Some historians note that many female sent-down youths lost their virginity in the countryside, and, therefore, the government cancelled routine physical check-ups of virginity before female youths were selected to join the army or return to the city.

In *Tempered in the Revolutionary Furnace: China’s Youth in the Rustication Movement* (2002) Pan states that sent-down youths are expected to “cultivate a correct concept of proletarian love,” and their “love and marriage were affected very much by political and social considerations, which created obstacles, twists, and turns” (181). She says:

The zhiqing generation (*educated youths*) grew up in a puritan society. As in traditional China, sex was never a proper topic in public or in polite conversation, and more so during Mao’s time. The topic was taboo. Before and during the Cultural Revolution, middle class authorities forbade courtship among students …. The Party tried to channel love to right objects by promoting a set of orthodox concepts …. One’s personal interests must be subordinate to the interests of the revolution … [and] one should never pursue personal love or happiness. Such a pursuit was an idea of the bourgeoisie. (182)

Pan highlights how traditions and contemporary politics together pushed sex further away from the public discourse (popular culture, media, or education) and made it a stigma. In

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60 *Zhiqing* refers to educated youths who were sent down to the countryside for re-education during the Cultural Revolution.
this context, Chinese youths were not allowed to show any affection or talk about romance or love. Any defiance would invite denouncement and criticism.

She further notes that “in those days . . . we pursued political progressiveness relationships” because “love for the opposite sex was dirty” and “interest in the opposite sex was an unhealthy, shameful, petty bourgeois feeling,” and “it took courage to fall in love” (183). Pan’s statements speak to the sent-down youths in *Red Azalea* as well. In order for the youths to focus on re-education without thinking of the opposite sex, male and female sent-down youths on the farm are not allowed to have courtship or marriage within the first few years of being in the countryside (Pan 2002). They are usually assigned to different platoons, work different jobs, and barely interact with one another.

Min grounds her representation of sent-down youths’ sexual experiences in constructing a specific heterosexual discourse. According to Emily Honig, Min rewrites sex and sexuality as part of her historical experiences. Honig argues, “The state made discussion of love and sex taboo, but in reality sex was discussed and performed in contexts not sanctioned by the state” (Honig 145). In the memoir, Min first reveals a heterosexual discourse of sent-down youths. Although Chinese sent-down youths were discouraged from pursuing romantic heterosexual love relationships, the government had specific policies regarding sent-down youths’ marriages and relationships. Chinese historian Liu Xiaomeng (1998) suggests that the government at first expected these youths to postpone their romance and marriages to the age of 25 for females and 28 for males, but then encouraged them to be married in the countryside. Therefore, many sent-down youths were married without any hindrance while working on the farm or in the
countryside (Liu 2004). Liu mentions that during the early years of the sent-down movement, Puritan abstinence was a norm.

Toward the end of the Cultural Revolution, however, sent-down youths had more freedom to explore relationships. Although love and sex were still not publicly discussed, many sent-down youths were married either to local peasants or to their own peers, when they reached the legal age of marriage (25 for women and 28 for men). In a study of sent-down youths during the Cultural Revolution, Peter J. Seybolt (1975) claims, “In the second half of 1973, Party committees and secretaries were told to devote regular attention to [sent-down youths] and to take steps to improve the management of their affairs. They were told to conduct inspections in order to uncover and to end discriminatory treatment and other abuses” (xxiv-xxv). Thomas Berstein (1977) observes along similar lines that youths’ marriages were facilitated after 1973 “under the conditions of encouraging late marriage” and married youths were taught “to continue the revolution after they get married . . . to handle correctly the relations between work, study, and family affairs, and also to practice planned parenthood” (161-162). He also states that “as more UYs grow into full adulthood the marriage issue will become more and more salient and will prompt policy makers and administrators to commit more resources to facilitate such marriages” (166).

Both Seybolt and Berstein acknowledge that late marriages were encouraged among sent-down urban youths. Although many marriages ended for various reasons toward the end of the Cultural Revolution, sent-down urban youths actually had more freedom to be in heterosexual love relationships. Min became a sent-down youth on Red
Fire Farm in 1975, a year before the end of the Cultural Revolution. She did not encounter as many political obstacles to relationships as those sent-down youths before her. Nonetheless, Min’s representations of sent-down youths’ sexual experiences through her memoir reflect overall state restrictions of courtships and marriages for sent-down youths during the Cultural Revolution, even though her own experiences took place at a time when those restrictions were beginning to wane.

**Constructing the Sent-Down Body in Multiple Locations**

Casey argues, “The body retains memories of pleasures as well as of pains” (157). The Chinese female sent-down body in Min’s memoir practices memories of pains and pleasures. Her memoir constructs two types of the sent-down body: the condemned and the transgressive sent-down body. The first is represented through Little Green’s tragedies when she pursues heterosexual romance, but encounters humiliation, becomes insane, and dies. The second is constructed around same-sex romance under a mosquito net.

The sent-down body in *Red Azalea* is first the condemned and punished body. Min and her peers spend their coming-of-age years on the farm under scrutiny and have few opportunities to express their desires for love and romance with the opposite sex. If they do, they will be punished or denounced. Little Green, a beautiful sent-down youth on Red Fire Farm and her no-name bookish male lover are caught while making love one night in the wheat field, and are openly humiliated and denounced. Little Green falls into madness after her lover is executed for being a rapist. She is found drowned in a river.
months after the tragic event. Min writes in the preface of *Red Azalea*, “In America I have tried to bury my own memories. Yet, I see Little Green’s drowned face in the fireworks on the Fourth of July. . . . Every time I have loved, I hear the sound of a bullet and am reminded of the price of falling in love at the labor camp and what happened to those who paid for passion” (xiii). Through Little Green and her lover, Min shows to her readers what a big price many of her sent-down peers have to pay for love and desires when proletarian revolution is prioritized over anything else. Little Green’s tragedy lies in her and her lover making their desires visible, which leads to condemnation and punishment. Their romance and desires are incompatible with the political agenda and party expectations of the sent-down youths. Consequently, the two individuals are made public spectacles to send warnings to their peers.

Little Green’s bold move to demonstrate her femininity and express her love in the wheat field definitely defies the party rules and expectations of sent-down youths like her, and results in severe punishment. Min characterizes Little Green first as a young woman fearlessly displaying femininity, which is uncommon among female sent-down youths. When Min first befriends the eighteen-year old Little Green shortly after she arrives at Red Fire Farm, Little Green is a regular sent-down girl, just like other girls on the farm. Many other female sent-down youths wear short hair and dull or dark color to conform to the political agenda or show their determination to carry on the proletarian revolution, but Little Green acts very differently. For instance, Comrade Lu, a female platoon leader wears a “short hair cut” (45), and another female platoon leader is seen to wear “an old People’s Liberation Army uniform, washed almost white” and “two short
thick braids” (48). In contrast, Little Green is brave to “decorate her beauty” and tie “her braids with colorful strings” instead of “brown rubber bands” to show her femininity (51). Although she is unaware of any insidious danger of punishment, Min senses “the danger in her boldness” (51) at the very beginning. She says, “I knew the rules. I knew the thin line between right and wrong. I watched Little Green. But I did not have the guts to show contempt for the rules” (51). It is not that Min and other female sent-down youths have no interest in displaying their youth and femininity; rather, they believe it is against the party teachings and are intimidated by possible punishments. For them, “a true Communist should never care about the way she looked. The beauty of the soul was what should be cared about” (52). Such belief is the result of promoting Puritan ideology and heroic figures in public education, films, and other forms of media.

Under the surface of Little Green’s display of youth and femininity is the fact that she is frantically in love, which results in punishment of her and her lover by extremists and activists such as Lu and Yan. When Yan gathers the sent-down youths in her platoon and leads them to the field to catch Little Green and her male lover, Min is surprised and confused because she does not know the purpose of the trip. Nevertheless, she follows the platoon to the field, and recognizes Little Green’s voice in the dark. She says silently to herself:

A good female comrade was supposed to devote all her energy, her youth, to the revolution; she was not permitted even to think about a man until her late twenties, when marriage would be considered. I though about the consequences that Little Green had to be bear if she were caught. I could see her future ruined right here. She would be abandoned by society and her family disgraced. I crawled forward toward the noise. . . . The murmuring and hard breathing became louder. (58)
Min is worried about Little Green, but cannot help her because Yan presses her down to the ground while they crawl toward Little Green and her lover. They turn into targets of punishment when “thirty other flashlights . . . were switched on at the same time (59), and their naked buttocks are exposed to the view of other sent-down youths who are present. Yan orders a corporeal punishment of the male lover with whipping. Punishing the male lover is Yan’s method of disciplining the male lover’s body for violating Little Green’s body, because she blames his desires for leading to the sex act in the wheat field. She believes that “today’s woman [is] no longer the victim of man’s desire” (60) and she saves Little Green from being poisoned by “bourgeois thoughts” (61). What Yan and other sent-down youths dismiss, however, is that Little Green also has her own desires to fulfill, and she is not forced into the relationship with her male lover.

Following the scene in the wheat field, Min portrays how the male lover’s body is condemned and punished in a public trial and execution. Little Green is forced to claim that she has been raped by reading a paper written for her in advance, and her male lover is then executed. The punishment of the male lover’s body is based on the premise that Little Green’s body is victimized and subjected to his desires, which are bourgeois. Yan and Lu say that the man is “too deeply poisoned by bourgeois thoughts,” which has to be stopped from spreading (61). They also agree that they should save Little Green from his desire in order to be a qualified revolutionary. In this case, Little Green’s peers do not give a thought to her desires in the relationship, even though they are obvious in her expression of femininity and happiness.

Little Green does not suffer any corporeal punishment, but her sufferings are
psychological and mental. Shame, humiliation, and trauma lead to her madness after her male lover is executed. Her madness is attributable to repression of thought and control of expression of love, and is more politically induced than pathologically advanced. She stops bathing, chops off her long braids, and sings songs at night, and is diagnosed with “a nervous breakdown” (62) in a hospital in Shanghai. Notwithstanding her insanity, Little Green is not confined to any institution. Instead, she is sent back to the farm and watched by her peers. She is very quiet and expressionless after taking some unknown drugs prescribed by her doctors. The drugs leave her void of any human feelings. She even becomes “dangerous to herself” by “swallowing tiny stones” or “eating worms” (85). A few months later, Little Green dies a tragic death: she is drowned in a canal. The boatman who found her body believes that “It looks like she had a fit” and “struggled, but got tangled in the weeds” (121). Although it is unclear how Little Green gets into the water and is strangled, her silent death demonstrates one of the extreme consequences of punishing the sent-down youth’s body for being politically incompatible with the party’s expectations.

What is ironic about Little Green’s death is that she is “admitted posthumously into the Youth League of the Communist Party” (a progressive youth league for people between fourteen and twenty eight) and her family receives “a check for 500 yuan as a condolence” (121). It is incredible to grant Little Green the membership of the Youth League, because what she does -- displaying youth and femininity and courting love --

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61 The correct translation of the league should be The Communist Youth League of China. In the meantime, checks for personal use were nowhere to be seen during the Cultural Revolution. Individuals used cash the most popular form of making transactions.
demonstrates political incompatibility whereas the Youth League represents compliance with the Communist Party’s agenda. The money Little Green’s family receives is usually considered martyrs’ pensions instead of condolence, as only martyrs’ families are eligible to any kind of pensions from the government.

The friendly gesture from Little Green’s platoon here reveals a sense of guilt from the leaders who participated in abusing and victimizing Little Green and her male lover. Although Comrade Lu and many other sent-down youths are political activists, who firmly believed that they helped the party stop “bourgeois thoughts from spreading” (61) by executing the male lover, Min and Yan are tormented by a sense of guilt. However, if they do not take any actions or participate in condemning Little Green and her male lover, they will be condemned as compliances.

Min reveals that she and Yan feel angry, guilty, and ashamed for helping destroy Little Green’s life. She writes that she “lowered [her] flashlight” (59) when Little Green’s naked body was exposed under all the flashlights. She also describes how Yan’s “eyes glisten[ed] with tears” and she “took off her jacket to cover Little Green” (60). Min blames herself for pointing her gun at Little Green, and destroying her. She says, “We murdered her. We were mad. We strangled her into madness” (62). She also wonders “how other people [were] living with this guilt, if there [was] any guilt” (85). She and Yan watch Little Green carefully, just in case anything worse happens to her. Yan, for the first time in her life, has “put faith in superstitions” by attempting to catch one hundred poisonous snakes, because “Her grandmother once collected snakes to cure her disabled sister” and “when she had one hundred, her sister stood up and walked”
Yan hopes to eventually help Little Green to “come back to her senses magically” by catching one hundred water snakes.

The unhappy ending of Little Green and her male lover delivers a warning message to other sent-down youths on the farm: they have to watch their desires and sexual behaviors. For instance, even though Yan likes Leopard Lee, a male sent-down youth in a different platoon, she is very cautious about making it known to Leopard and the public, and has to keep her feelings a secret. Min writes about Yan’s feelings, “If it was wrong for Little Green, it should be wrong for her too. I’m a Party member. I can’t do things I have forbidden others to do” (105). Like Min, who develops desires to be touched on her eighteenth birthday, Yan also has desires. Nevertheless, neither of them is able to pursue any relationships by virtue of their political concerns and the same-sex work environment. As a result, they have to learn to redefine masculinity and femininity represented in traditional heterosexual relationships, sometimes in the form of same-sex desires such as lesbianism. Although not all same-sex relationships during the Cultural Revolution were redirected desires, the lesbianism represented in Red Azalea could be a result of the absence and control of heterosexual relationships on Red Fire Farm. It is also a liberating move that exemplifies what female sent-down youths such as Min and Yan do to control how they want to fulfill their own desires under censorship.

The sent-down body, then, is not purely condemned and punished. It is also the transgressive body that embodies same sex desires in Red Azalea. In literary works -- fictions and memoirs -- about sent-down youths, homosexuality is hardly addressed, and literary criticism about female eroticism at the time is very sparse. Nonetheless, oral
history and sociological studies of sent-down youths’ experiences demonstrate that, although the same-sex relationship in China “was and still is not a ‘proper’ subject and behavior, it existed” among sent-down youths (Pan 193). Pan says, “In zhiqing life it was not difficult for same-sex people to feel close to each other. These youth grew up together, they shared everyday life together. Their emotional and physical needs could bring them, women or men, very close” (193). This is a condition to establish a same-sex bond when many sent-down youths during the Cultural Revolution were constrained to pursue or have heterosexual love relationships.

In a recent survey of gays and lesbians in China, a chapter on lesbians has some findings about female sent-down youths’ eroticism. Two female sent-down youths (Jingya and Simin) were only seventeen and eighteen when they arrived in a village in Yunnan Province in the mid-1970s. They developed a female bond, took a walk together every day, talked about their families, studies, realities, and goals. They, together with other female sent-down youths, lived in a few dorms. At first, they lived in different dorms, but one moved into the other’s dorm, and they slept in the same bed. Their peers gossiped about them being lesbians, which made them get a book of medicine to study what homosexuality meant. Although gays and lesbians were considered freaks, they did not believe themselves to be freaks. They then decided that they only liked each other and would get married to the opposite sex in the future. They were both married later and had their own children. Pan and the survey have addressed what has not been much

62 The survey was conducted by Beijing Gender Health Education Institute, a NGO sponsored by Ford Foundations, UNAIDS, UNDP, WHO, and many others. It was released on January 11, 2009 and can be accessed at www.bghei.org/html/chengguo/03/20090111/23.html. Part of the survey of lesbians can be accessed at <http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_3fe3a4610100dsm3.html##>. Web. 24 Nov., 2009.
discussed -- female erotic experiences during the Cultural Revolution, and provide a context to better interpret lesbianism represented in Anchee Min’s *Red Azalea*.

At the same time, two fictions about subtle lesbian love among sent-down youths also help contextualize Min’s memoir in expressing lesbian love. They are *Sunken Snow* (*chenxue 沉雪*) (1998) by twin sisters Li Jing & Li Ying, former sent-down youths, and *The Lyrical Years* (*shuqingniandai 抒情年代*) (2005) by a former sent-down youth, Pan Jing. These works are written in Chinese. *Sunken Snow* describes, among other things, Sun Xiaoying’s sent-down life on a farm in the northeast of China. Her relationship with Shu Chang, another female sent-down youth, reminds readers of Min and Yan. Pan’s *The Lyrical Years* includes portrayals of subtle female love between the narrator and Shanshan, her only female sent-down roommate when they live on a small island and are isolated from other sent-down youths. Neither fiction blatantly shows lesbian love or orientation and both end with their main characters returning to the city and termination of the lesbian love or female relationship. This explains that lesbian love is situational and nurtured by the countryside where heterosexual relationships are closely watched and denounced.

This also means that Chinese lesbianism during the Cultural Revolution needs to be understood in its historical and political moment that is unprecedented before and after the Cultural Revolution. Sociologist John Gagnon and his colleagues (1998) suggest in “Bisexuality: A Sociological Perspective” (1998) that bisexuality, like homosexuality and heterosexuality, is “an ideology and a practice” and the behavior of bisexual people are often “transitory” or “situational” (84).
statement, it can also be used to interpret how sexuality in general is sometimes discursive, fluid, and mutable. In *Volatile Bodies* (1994), Elizabeth Grosz draws on Foucault’s explanation of corporeal punishments and sexuality to argue that “sexuality is nothing other than the effect of power. Power is able to gain a hold on bodies, pleasures, energies, through the construction and deployment of sexuality” (154). At a time when control of sent-down youths’ sexual behaviors is very strict, redirected sexual desires become an alternative, and some sent-down youths, consciously or unconsciously, empower themselves by voluntarily exploring ways of satisfying their desires, as is the case between Min and Yan in *Red Azalea*.

They release their desires through intimate relationships with the same sex. As a result, redirected desires and sexual behaviors in *Red Azalea* may be an alternative expression of repressed desires for the other sex. When engaging in intimacy with the same sex, the youths in the book do not pursue freedom of sex. Instead, Min shows that the state controls how and when they should engage in heterosexual relationships and leaves them little room to satisfy desires in their coming-of-age years. She also shows how the sent-down youths on her farm express their desires in an alternative sexual behavior. In so doing, they not only “deviate from the dominant discourses of gender” and cross “the boundaries of gender” but also deviate from the dominant discourse of sexuality (Kidd 203). In this sense, their bodies become transgressive by challenging heterosexual and politically correct relationships and engaging in the female bond during

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63 In “The Bearded Lesbian,” Mandy Kidd (1998) uses queer theory to discuss the bodily transformations in the form of growing a beard. She argues that this sign of masculinity deconstructs gender binaries and subverts prescribed femininity on the female body.
Wendy Larsen also emphasizes lesbianism in Min’s critique of the Cultural Revolution. She suggests that Min privileges “sexuality within human identity” and at the same time characterizes “sexuality under the revolutionary discourse as a kind of mass emotion” (425). She says that the book “represents lesbian sexuality as the primary means of emancipation for the protagonist” (Larsen 434).

Taking this theme into the framework of queer theory, Margareta Jolly analyzes Min’s memoir as queer life writing. She claims that the book is more about the search for a private self in sexual confession and expressing desires (Jolly 2001). She asserts that Red Azalea “is distinguished from other Cultural Revolution testimony in its sexual explicitness” (484). Jolly maintains that Red Azalea represents coming-out experiences and treats female homosexuality as sexual liberation during the Cultural Revolution. Nonetheless, Min “aims to discover and articulate a division between” the public and the private, “to create a private self” and “desire is positioned as the key to [her] individuation” (485). Therefore, Red Azalea tells “a story of sexual liberation without coming out” like similar works published in North America (Jolly 491). Jolly’s interpretation, however, fails to consider the complexity of historical realities at the time, and reduces female homosexuality in the book to a manifesto of resistance and liberated desires. What makes Red Azalea queer is not Jolly’s “coming in” or “sexual liberation.” Rather, Min creates a lot of ambiguity of relationships between men and women or women and women. They cautiously experiment with their sexual desires and explore ways of fulfilling desires according to subtle or drastic changes in their own situations.
Moreover, when analyzing and critiquing Red Azalea, they take Min’s voice as a reliable voice for historical truths without considering how autobiographical truths cannot be interpreted as historical truths. For instance, Book House, a Chinese magazine published by Hunan Education Publishing House, includes an article by Wu Guo (2006) who critically examines memoirs of the Cultural Revolution in English. He argues that Red Azalea is more fictional than autobiographical. In his view, the book seems to focus solely on three characters and their conflicts: Min (the narrator), and her female leaders Yan and Lu. He also points out that two historical events were misrepresented in the book. “Min becomes a sent-down youth in 1975, but, when she describes her contest with Yan on reciting Mao’s teachings, she mentions what Lin Biao says in the red book” (Lin died in 1971 when escaping to the former Soviet Union and was condemned as a traitor). Wu Guo also notes an historical error. “Min says she went to Shanghai Film Studio in 1976, and attended meetings to denounce Lin Biao, Confucius, and Premier Zhou Enlai,” which is incorrect because Lin Biao and Premier Zhou Enlai passed away in 1971 and 1976 respectively, and the national movement initiated by Mao’s wife to denounce them was 1974. He argues that Western readers are “attracted by the content and plot” in Red Azalea and are unable to tell the discrepancy whereas Chinese readers are more critical about Min’s skew of historical events and timelines.

Feminist literary critics Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2001) claim that we

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should “approach self-referential writing as an intersubjective process that occurs within the writer/reader pact, rather than as a true-or-false story” and focus on the “process of communicative exchange and understanding” instead of “assessing and verifying knowledge” (13). Most contemporary analysts of memoirs or autobiographical writings assume that what appears to be factual or reliable is also reconstructed by the author in certain contexts. Novelist, essayist, and playwright Gore Vidal (1925-) says in Palimpsest: A Memoir (1995) that “a memoir is how one remembers one’s own life, while autobiography is history, requiring research, dates, facts double-checked” (5). This means that the author has a choice as to how and what to remember about his or her life. Therefore, only what the author wants the reader to know about certain experiences is presented in memoirs.

Although Red Azalea shows Min’s memories of the Cultural Revolution, feminist literary critics would suggest that readers look for how certain experiences are reconstructed instead of looking for truths. Min chooses to remember and represent her sexual experiences -- lesbianism -- over other experiences because she was unable to write about them while she was in China. Although her memories do not encompass everything about the Cultural Revolution, they make it clear that experiences of that period are not monolithic. Silence about sexuality at the time does not necessarily mean various sexual experiences are absent from Chinese people’s lives, as Pan and the recent survey have discussed. For instance, Min demonstrates that female eroticism is also a part of sent-down youths’ sexual experiences in the Cultural Revolution. She tells her readers about her relationship with Yan, and reconstructs gender and sexuality through
defining and redefining femininity and masculinity at a specific historical moment.

Gendered sent-down experiences during the Cultural Revolution constrain sent-down youths’ expressions of desires. Many of them were assigned to work and live with same-sex youths and barely had opportunities to interact with the other sex. One of the primary political reasons was to have them focus on re-education and purge bourgeois or unhealthy courtship. Under such circumstances, perceptions and constructions of femininity and masculinity were redirected among sent-down youths. For instance, joining many other sent-down youths from Shanghai, Anchee Min becomes a platoon member on Red Fire Farm in 1974, and has two female leaders -- Yan and Lu. The platoon only has female sent-down youths, while all-male platoons are also on the same farm. Unlike many other female sent-down youths on the farm, Yan appears to be more masculine than feminine in Min’s eyes. She, first and foremost, represents the ideal female body image in Mao’s era: an iron woman. Yan’s appearance and posture immediately catch Min’s attention when they first meet on the farm:

She was tall, well-built, and walked with authority. … She had a pair of fiery intense eyes, in which I saw the energy of a lion. She had weather-beaten skin thick eyebrows, a bony nose, high cheekbones, a full mouth, in the shapes of a water chestnut. She had the shoulders of an ancient warlord, extravagantly broad. She was barefoot. Her sleeves and trousers were rolled halfway up. Her hands rested on her waist. When her eyes focused on mine, I trembled for no reason. She burned me with the sun in her eyes. I felt bare. (48)

This paragraph demonstrates Min’s perception of masculinity through Yan’s physique. Historically and traditionally, Chinese women are petite, walk softly and gracefully by lowering their eyes. In this tradition, women look prettier with their eyebrows like the
shape of willow leaves, and their mouths as small and round as cherries. High cheekbones on a woman’s face imply bad luck for her husband, and women usually have sloped shoulders, which look better in traditional Chinese costumes. Yan clearly does not have any facial features and posture that link her with femininity. Describing Yan’s masculinity, Min focuses on her body with words such as “tall,” “thick eyebrows,” “high cheekbones,” and “extravagantly broad” shoulders. She also describes Yan’s posture of heroism and revolutionary passion: she is “barefoot,” her “sleeves and trousers rolled halfway up,” and her hands “rested on her waist.” This image is in sharp contrast with images of other female sent-down youths on the farm. For instance, Little Green is portrayed as “pale,” having “thin and fine” fingers, walking “gracefully, like a willow in a soft breeze,” and wearing “long braids” (51). Her femininity, however, is clichéd and does not match images of Chinese women in the new era, whereas Yan’s display of masculinity and posture make her stand out from among her female peers.

Min confesses later that she needs “Yan to worship,” because she is “more real than Mao” (55). Min starts to “impress her” by giving “speeches in every night’s self-confession and criticism meeting” (56). Although many sent-down youths consider such participation as activism, Min makes it more personal than political in Red Azalea. Moreover, when she secretly admires Yan, Min tries to become someone she is not -- a heroine at the time. She says, “For some strange reason I felt that I still needed Yan to be my heroine. I must have a heroine to worship, to follow, to act as a mirror. It was how I was taught to live. I needed it to survive, to get by” (69-70). Therefore, Min’s initial admiration of Yan is not strictly desire-driven; rather, it is the political construction of
new-era women that pulls her toward Yan, who later on becomes her lover in the book.

The gendered dimension of sent-down experiences is also complicated by the sexualization of the experiences in *Red Azalea*. At the age of seventeen, Min has started her sexual awakening but she only vaguely knows what it means when her body sends her signals of growing desires -- her body feels itchy when she sleeps on her reed sleeping mat (a popular sleeping mat woven with reed in the summer in China. It helps the body cool down.). In contrast, Little Green is more sexually mature, but Min does not identify with Little Green’s femininity and adores her only “as a friend” (56). Little Green’s tragedy has a huge impact on Min. She witnesses the price a young woman and her male lover have to pay for relationships and love. In *Red Azalea* Min does not explain if the tragedy has changed her own mind about pursuing any relationships while she is still on the farm, but she is fully aware what is at stake if she dares to express her desires, and show her attractiveness like Little Green.

Like Little Green, Min is aware of her own desires for the opposite sex but she is trapped amidst balancing political expectations and personal needs, especially after Little Green and her male lover were caught, humiliated, and punished. She reflects, “A good female comrade was supposed to devote all her energy, her youth, to the revolution; she was not permitted even to think about a man until her late twenties, when marriage would be considered” (59). At a time when late marriages at the age of 25 or 28 were expected, coming of age at 18 was tormenting for Min, and her peers. She articulates her personal sexual feelings on her eighteenth birthday:
I spent the night of my eighteenth birthday under the mosquito net. A nameless anxiety had invaded me. It felt like a sweating summer afternoon. Irritatingly hot. The air felt creamy. It was the ripeness of the body. It began to spoil. The body screamed inside trying to break the bondage …. I used a small mirror to examine my body, to examine the details of its private parts. I listened to my body, carefully. I heard its trouble, its disturbance. It had been trying to capture something, a foreign touch, to soothe its anxiety, but in vain. The body demanded to break away from its ruler, the mind. It was angry. It drove me to where I did not want to go: I had begun having thoughts about men. I dreamed of being touched by many hands. I was disgusted with myself. . . . It was violent. My body was in hunger. I could not make it collaborate with me. (60-61)

As a fully developed young woman, Min desires a male touch, but she has to practice self-censorship in order to meet with the government expectations of sent-down youths. In this paragraph, “mosquito net,” “bondage,” “ruler,” and “mind” are symbolically used to refer to the censorship or control inflicted upon her and her body by her peers and the party. They also serve as figurative castration of sent-down youths’ minds and bodies by communist ideologies. Min is under constant watch, and is unable to satisfy her desires.

Min’s desires during her coming-of-age years on the farm are complicated, and she falls madly in love with Yan. Yan joined the Communist Party at eighteen, and had “one of her braids burnt off, her face scorched” a few years previously, when she had tried to save ripe crops from a fire (55). Min says, “Yan was the heroine in real life. . . . I wanted to reach her, to become her, to become a heroine. . . . I need Yan to worship. She inspired me, gave significance to my life” (55). She imitates Yan by cutting her long braids and walking like her. She even falls asleep “in thinking of her,” and tries to impress and “conquer her” by all means (56, 70). Min’s emotional attachment to Yan is from her admiration of Yan’s display of determination, authority, and power. It is also
from Yan’s representation of what Min does not have -- masculinity manifested through the female body.

Yan looks strong, intimidating, and hard to approach, but she appears to have interest in and desires for Min. She and Min are in love and come out finally one night when they sleep under one mosquito net. This is the sublime moment of expressing same-sex desires in *Red Azalea*. Min writes:

I moved my hands slowly through her shirt. She pulled my fingers to unbutton her bra. . . . I felt a sweet shock. My heart beat disorderly. A wild horse broke off its reins. . . . I did not know what role I was playing anymore: her imagined man or myself. I was drawn to her. The horse kept running wild. I went there the sun rose. Her lips were the color of tomato. There was a gale mixed with thunder inside me. I was spellbound by desire. . . . I lost myself in the caresses. (129)

In this scene, the female bond between Min and Yan turns into female eroticism. By crossing the fine line of female friendship, Min and Yan move into a territory barely touched and hard to imagine during the Cultural Revolution. This scene is the defining moment that indicates how Min and Yan break the constraints imposed upon them and give themselves the freedom to express their desires in the very presence of Lu and other female sent-down youths. In this scene, the mosquito net is symbolically used to exemplify state censorship in general, which gives Min and Yan no space to fulfill their desires. It, however, is also used as a protection of Min and Lu from those who watch them closely in the dorm.

The relationship between Min and Yan will not lead to a happy ending. At a time when sent-down youths have fewer opportunities to pursue romantic relationships of any kind, female eroticism is the equivalent of crime (same-sex relationships were punished...
harshly as discussed earlier in the chapter). While Min and Yan love each other, they are also aware of a dim future. First, their desires were politically incompatible with the government expectations of them; second, the same-sex relationship went against traditional heterosexual norms. At the same time, Lu spies on them, particularly when there is a tension between her and Yan.

The tension between Yan and Lu is not personal. Rather, it is political. Lu represents those who closely follow the Communist Party and deny anything that is personal. Lu is an extreme case in the book. She shows unbending loyalty to the Communist Party -- “she was an old member of the Communist Party family” (50) and “the daughter of a revolutionary martyr” (76). She even sleeps with a “Red Army martyr’s skull” at night (77). Her determination to be a true revolutionary pushes her to taking extreme actions. She “watched everyone and recorded her observations in her red-plastic notebook,” “made political dunce caps” (79), and shows “her single-minded ambition for power” (92).

Lu, who is already suspicious of their relationship, is constantly after Yan and Min. She “was secretly calling for approval from the upper Party committee for a midnight search in every mosquito net” (132). Min notices that she is “followed either by [Lu] or some of [Lu’s] trusted followers,” and has become “Lu’s target to attack Yan” (133). Lu is “addicted to watching us,” Min says (135). Yan decides to punish Lu for being a watchdog for the Party. She decides to go against her own belief and determination that used to defy individual desires. She makes a scheme without telling
Min, and makes a spectacle of Lu and herself in front of the sent-down youths on the farm:

Yan and Lu were locked together, half naked, like a pair of grotesque mating silkworms. The strong flashlights whitened their bodies. . . . A petrol tractor came; the Chief Party Secretary stepped down. The soldiers made a path for him. I stood in amazement. I was amazed by Yan’s plan. I understood that Yan would always be my ruler. . . . Yan said, ‘I seduced her and I’ll take the punishment for my crime’. (153-154)

This scene is similar to that of catching Little Green and her male lover, except that Yan and Lu are on the spotlight. It is also ironic that Yan and Lu organized the public humiliation of Little Green and her male lover, but now they become the target of attack. However, the crimes associated with the two scenes are different. In the first scene, Min uses “rape” when she describes how those who catch Little Green’s male lover want to prove that Little Green is a victim. In that scene, the so-called rape leads to corporeal punishment, death penalty, particularly during the Cultural Revolution. In the second scene, she uses “seduce” and “crime,” which reflects a degradation of morality and stigma but is not legally punishable. Yan strategically uses female desires for each other to kill the political careers for Lu and herself, but she protects Min from any potential harm and clears her way back to Shanghai. In this sense, female desires for each other and the bond between Yan and Min further confirm what Min believes, that is, sent-down youths pay a price for love and romance.

Min and Yan are unable to maintain their relationship. While desires for the opposite sex are censored, same-sex desires are not tolerated whatsoever, because
heterosexuality is still the norm. They have to say good-bye to each other when Min returns to Shanghai to play a role in Madame Mao’s film *Red Azalea*.

The female desires for each other in *Red Azalea*, however, convey mixed messages of fluidity and the mutable nature of sexuality and desires. While Min and Yan love each other, they still harbor desires for the opposite sex. Yan visits Min in Shanghai one day. Both are excited to see each other again, and want each other badly, but they do not express their desires for each other, as there have been many changes after Min left the farm. Yan starts to see Leopard, who has “always wanted [Yan]” but is “afraid of political pressure” because “his secretary was after him” (200). She admits to Min that she and Leopard love each other, but they are afraid of punishment. She tells Min, “The farm was too dangerous to. . . . You know one gets caught easily” (200), and she and Leopard would like to meet in Min’s house so that Min can guard them. However desperate they are, Min and Yan are aware that they will never be able to hold on to their past relationship. Min says:

Now matter how badly we wanted each other, our situation pulled us apart. Hopelessly apart. Without warning, without pushing. All of a sudden we were no longer familiar. Yan was desperate. I was desperate. We did not want to realize that we had been holding on to something, a dead past that could no longer prosper. (211)

Therefore, Min makes room for Yan and Leopard and guards them on the porch, when they make love:

I felt as if I had never left the porch. I was in Yan. It was three instead of two people on the porch. My curiosity swelled. My lust was irresistible. Yan knew I was guarding her. She knew I was behind the draperies. She wanted me to participate in this, didn’t she? . . . I wanted to feel Leopard’s body. I wanted to have the three of us connected like electrical
wires. (217)

At this moment, she sees herself as both Yan and Leopard. Yan represents her other half whose desires are fulfilled through the male touch while Leopard represents her other half who desires Yan and wants to conquer her. Min cannot resist her desire to watch them. She says:

My desire overtook me. I carefully, carefully opened the slit of the green draperies. I looked in and saw an overwhelming red color first and figured it was Yan’s red underwear. My hand dropped. The slit closed. … I did not understand why I was hurt by what I saw. … He was possessing her. Leopard was possessing Yan. . . . My tears shattered uncontrollably. (219)

Before Leopard leaves, he says to Min, “I am glad that you are not a man, otherwise you would have been the one to win her” (223). What Leopard implies here is that Min is unable to fully satisfy Yan’s desires by participating in conventional and heterosexual activities.

This scene not only complicates how sexual desires are practiced and fulfilled but also further demonstrates there is not a clear defining line between homosexuality and heterosexuality. For sent-down youths like Min, Yan, and Leopard, their desires are fulfilled provided what is available to them on or off the farm. Female eroticism and heterosexual relationships are, therefore, not fixed in the sexual discourse during the Cultural Revolution. It is also in this scene that both Min and Yan are aware of the illegitimacy of their relationship, and Yan eventually destroys their “love to preserve the love” (222). Even though Min speculates Yan’s change of attitude to her and wishes their love would be eternal, she knows it is time for them to terminate their bond.
The reclaimed heterosexual relationship between Yan and Leopard in the city also proves that Red Fire Farm limits sent-down youths’ sexual expression. The city provides more freedom than the farm even though desires are still watched.

**Desires Policed But Fulfilled**

Min returns to Shanghai, engages in a different relationship and witnesses sexual activities that she does not see on the farm. In its final chapters, her memoir represents sexual experiences policed but also fulfilled under societal pressures and heterosexual norms. She shows that practices of desires and secret spaces are created by some sent-down youths or Shanghai residents, who want to explore various ways of fulfilling their desires even though they are heavily policed.

First, Min demonstrates how sent-down youths maneuver their own ways of satisfying their desires. For instance, some find other ways of satisfying their desires by not jeopardizing their political career and future. This echoes Pan’s analysis of the political condition in which sent-down youths live, and explains how individual desires and political control counteract each other. Pan writes:

> Living in the countryside, zhiqing (educated youths) became sexually awakened. The children of Mao who had grown up in a puritanical society matured. Many zhiqing mention that they received “sex” education from nature and from the peasants. “Laboring in the county, you saw horses do it, dogs do it. And you knew.” (193)

Although many sent-down youths learn about sexual activities in various ways, they find it almost impossible to satisfy their bodies’ needs. Sexual desires are controlled and censored whereas sexual awakening is natural and needs attention. Therefore, they resort
to different ways of satisfying their desires. For instance, Lu in *Red Azalea* establishes an intriguing relationship with her male dog 409 -- a German shepherd -- when she tries to seek certain pleasure through watching him mate female dogs in different villages. The arrival of 409 “from the headquarters” (94) changes Lu dramatically. The male dog is very tall: “When 409 stood on his feet, he was as tall as Lu. Lu often had him walk on his back legs while he put his front legs on her shoulders” (95). She and the dog “would take a walk by the sea every night. … She often recited one particular Mao quotation to 409” (95). It is not only his loyalty but also his reputation to mate female dogs that pleases Lu. She took him “to local villages where he could mate” but female dogs’ owners do not welcome him. They manage to poison him to death. When Min sees her and the dog, he is “lying in Lu’s bosom, dead” and Lu sobs “like a village widow” (97) and sits “by the [dog’s] grave the whole night” (98). Yan says to her, “If I were you, I wouldn’t have taken him to mate so much” (97). 409’s body is punished for abusing his sexual power over female dogs. In a short period of owning 409, Lu not only gets a companionship she is unable to get from her peers but also obtains satisfaction by taking him to mate female dogs. When Lu mourns his death, it is about a loss of companionship as well as a loss of her opportunities for pleasure.

Second, Min illustrates different scenes in Shanghai where desires are fulfilled in extreme ways even though they are closely policed. The first scene portrays a man “dressed up like a woman” (206). He goes to bathe in a ladies’ public bathhouse, where women walk naked, bathe and dress up in front of everyone else (public bathhouses were very popular in cities as apartments did not have bathtubs or the shower head installed in
the bathroom. Although public bathhouses are not popular now, they still exist in some cities and many universities in China). The man undresses himself and exposes his body to the women around him. Such perverted act leads to his arrest. Min and Yan also learn from the guard who collects tickets at the entrance of the bathhouse, “A few hundred men are arrested each year for peeking through the women’s shower window” (207). The guard also tells them that he caught “a woman in the men’s big tub” (207). He says:

She looked boyish, tall and slim. She had a flat chest. She had thick, thick hair on her thing. In fact, she came to bathe all the time. She said she worked as a porter. I couldn’t tell from her voice. It’s natural for a young boy to have a girlish voice, right? . . . A strange thing happened. Our men’s tub ticket all sold out and still there were people waiting. It got me suspicious. Well, word got out. . . . With all the steam in the air, it was like walking in a big fog. Strange hands would massage their sun instrument (penis). (207)

Although the guard caught her and sent her to the State Security Department, he says that he misses her body. This scene shows that the public bathhouse has become a location where men and women sometimes fulfill their desires by passing as the opposite sex. Although a bathhouse is public, it is also private in the sense that the body is private and sheltered to a certain degree, and the government is unable to exert any control of the activities in it. Therefore, people take advantage of the bathhouse to explore various ways of fulfilling their desires.

Another space people use to fulfill their sexual desires is a public space such as the Peace Park in Shanghai. The park is a haven for couples at night, even though it is heavily patrolled. Min and her male supervisor meet in the park the night before he leaves Shanghai. Thick trees surround them. They embrace and kiss each other.
Although it is dark in the park, they are also in danger of being caught, because park
guards patrol the park for criminals, holding flashlights. To Min’s surprise, there are
more couples in the park than she could imagine. She writes:

A group of people with flashlights approached our direction. They were
guards of the city criminal-control patrols. We split and retreated into the
shadows. . . . To my surprise, as I followed the movement of the beams of
light, I saw human figures in the bushes. Not a few, but many. Heads
 glued together, whispering in the dark. . . . We tried to find a place to sit
down. But all the benches in the wooded area, next to the bushes, in the
shadows . . . were occupied by couples. Each bench had three couples,
 facing in opposite directions. Nobody bothered anybody. They were
 all busy minding their fiery business, whispering and cuddling. (260)

People in the park take every chance to fulfill their desires that overpower their fears of
being arrested. It also shows how censorship is also limited. People have a public self to
present to the government and private self that finds full expressions of its desires in the
dark. The Supervisor shows Min, “Yes, I see the third one, and the fourth now. . . . I can
see them groaning silently, their fronts and rears exposed like animals in mating season,
begging for touch and penetration” (263).

It is ironic that the sexual discourse in the Mao era silenced expressions of love
and desires, but Chinese people resorted to different means to explore meanings of being
men and women on the farm, in family residences, public bathhouses, or parks. Their
sexual experiences silently challenge the political dimension of the sexual politics at the
time.

In Red Azalea Min reconstructs and represents different sexual experiences during
the Cultural Revolution. She reveals how desires are punished and policed by telling the
tragic ending of the romantic relationship between Little Green and her male lover. She
also portrays redirected desires in the form of a female erotic relationship between her and Yan. In the meantime, she tells her readers that Chinese people also explore alternate expressions of desires when they are highly policed. By telling all those experiences, Min recreates a sexual discourse in which the body and its desires are defined and redefined by different power relations, politics, and sexual experiences. This discourse not only interrogates many Western reductive representations and analyses of sexual politics in Mao’s era, but also adds depth and scope of sexual experiences that many Chinese representations and analyses of the Cultural Revolution have not revealed.
Chapter 3: Transnational Sexual Space: The Sent-Down Body in Short Stories and Poetry

Through immigration, the Chinese female sent-down body becomes the transnational sent-down body living outside China in the post-Cultural Revolution era (1976- ). Many previous sent-down youths were able to move overseas as students or immigrants in the 1980s, and the term “sent down” was used to describe a different type of “sent-down” experience, meaning yangchadui (overseas sent-down youths 洋插队). 66 The identities of many sent-down youths are redefined in the context of immigration. It is in a new sent-down context that Wang Ping (1957- ) represents historical experiences and experiences of immigration in creative writings by using the female body as a focal point. The sent-down body in her works is not only grounded in China but also in the United States, her new home. It is the transnational sent-down body that embodies memories of Chinese history, culture, politics, and immigration. Her short stories and poetry are unique in juxtaposing experiences in two worlds -- China and the United States. Therefore, they make it possible to understand Chinese immigrant women’s literary works about transnational experiences through a symbolic site of identity -- the female sent-down body. In Wang’s works, the female sent-down body, including its body odor, hair, and sexual identity, is used to demonstrate gendered and racialized identity constructions.

66 Now the term broadly refers to Chinese people moving overseas for various reasons.
Docile and Border-Crossing Sent-Down Body: An Immigration Discourse

The Chinese female sent-down body in Wang’s works is the docile or the border-crossing body. On the one hand, it functions under strict state control historically. On the other, it crosses various geopolitical and geocultural borders, and its movement is more complicated. Michel Foucault argues in *Discipline and Punish* (1995), “in every society, the body was in the grip of very strict powers, which imposed on it constraints, prohibitions, or obligations” (136). In this statement, Foucault makes it clear that political and social hierarchies manipulate the human body in various discourses of power, and individuals do not have an ownership of their own bodies. As discussed in the Introduction, gender is not an explicit topic in Foucault’s frame, but feminist theorists have adopted his frameworks to discuss gender from different perspectives. For instance, Susan Bordo and Gloria Anzaldúa, together with other feminist theorists draw on Foucault’s frame of the body to discuss the slender body or the bicultural body. Bordo draws on the Foucauldian disciplined and docile body to examine gender related issues in Western cultures. She suggests that social control in terms of weight is one form of discipline that administers “limits and possibilities” on the female body (130). This means, societies impose pressures on the female body so that it is in line with social and cultural expectations. Therefore, “The body is a medium of culture” and “a metaphor for culture” mirroring “social and political life.” Bordo’s study introduces gender as an operating concept in studying docile and disciplined bodies and provides a useful
theoretical framework to examine gender and body politics with a focus on historical, cultural and political meanings of the female body.

Anzaldúa echoes Foucault and suggests that the body is disciplined. She argues that the body is controlled by “cultural tyranny” (16). Like Bordo, she also uses gender as a key concept to study the meaning of the female body, but in the context of the bicultural and bilingual body. In her opinion, “culture forms our beliefs” and it “is made by those in power -- men” (16) and “the culture and the Church insist that women are subservient to males” (17). What is more, she calls attention to cultural hegemony in shaping and defining bilingual and bicultural female bodies in the United States.

The transnational and bicultural female sent-down body forms an immigration discourse in Wang’s creative works. A transnational perspective on the body helps demonstrate how the Chinese female body is disciplined and manipulated in history and culture. It also facilitates an understanding of how the Chinese female sent-down body is produced discursively through immigration. 67

The New Sent-down Body: Transcultural Writings

Wang Ping positions her short stories and poetry in two cultures. Instead of favoring one over the other or separating them from each other, she endeavors to examine how two cultures combine to define the Chinese female body and put it under surveillance in different ways. In an interview with Tara Moghadam in 2003, she said:

67 Some might suggest inserting Orientalism as a theoretical frame in this chapter. Although a focus on Orientalism is useful particularly in works by Sheng-Mei Ma. His frame does not specifically apply to interpreting works by contemporary Chinese immigrant writers. These works reflect a transnational move more than re-Orientalizing the Orient.
Living with two languages, two cultures, two histories, two drastically different worlds and traditions is very stimulating and enriching, needless to say. I regard myself as a bridge builder, a messenger, an interpreter and translator. The other side of the story is it can also take a huge toll on the mind and soul, for I often feel I have become an outsider to both, neither American nor Chinese, neither here or there, and the responsibility of seeing both cultures and carrying two traditions becomes too much. But at the same time, this straddling situation also allows me to look at things with an outsider’s objectivity and an insider’s knowledge, sensitivity and hopefully, insight. (4-5)

Like some of her peers from China, Wang also feels the pressure of living between worlds without being affiliated with either. This passage, on the other hand, suggests that she is very positive about being a cultural broker. Moreover, she is able to explore meanings of her own identity with her feet in two worlds. This statement might also give her readers an impression that each culture is in some way monolithic. Many immigrants, however, tend to associate themselves with a monolithic national and cultural identity even though there are differences within. They treat their adopted homes similarly. This why many of them feel torn between two worlds and use “cultural schizophrenia” to describe themselves (Krishnan 1990; Ma 1998). 68

Born in Shanghai, China, Wang spent three years as a sent-down youth in a village not far from Shanghai during the Cultural Revolution. She was an English major at Beijing University from 1980 to 1984 and moved to the United States as a graduate student at Long Island University in 1985. She earned an M.A. in English Literature in 1987 and received her doctoral degree in Comparative Literature from New York University in 1999. Her dissertation, Aching For Beauty: Footbinding as Cultural Fetish

68 People in their adopted countries also treat their cultures as monolithic without knowing any differences.
and Discourse of Body and Language (1999), is about foot binding, eroticism and pain, torture and fetishism, life and death, and sexual identities in Chinese history and cultural practices.\textsuperscript{69} Her interest in foot binding is also demonstrated in her poetry. She is a productive writer and has published short stories, poetry, and novels in English. The Last Communist Virgin brought her two book awards: Association for Asian American Studies Book Award for (2007) and Minnesota Book Awards in the category of Novel & Short Story (2008). She has also been awarded a National Endowment for the Arts Grant, The New York Foundation for the Arts Grant, The New York Council for the Arts Grants, and a Bush Foundation Grant, to name a few. Her major works include two collections of short stories, American Visa (1994) and The Last Communist Virgin (2007), two poetry collections Of Flesh & Spirit (1998) and The Magic Whip (2003), one anthology of Chinese poetry, and a book on Chinese foot binding. She is best known for American Visa (1994), her first book about a Chinese woman growing up in China and immigrating to the United States in the 1980’s.

American Visa is a collection of eleven interconnected stories of a Chinese woman, Seaweed, in America. The first half is set in China and the second half is in New York. Seaweed grows up during the Cultural Revolution, explores meanings of womanhood in China at the time, and moves to the United States, with high hopes and dreams. Unfortunately, the harsh reality for a new immigrant like Seaweed is not always promising. Some critics suggest that the book makes an unsettling parallel between

\textsuperscript{69} Her dissertation was published as a book project and won Eugene M. Kayden Book Award for the Best Book in the Humanities (2001). Her newest award is Loft Literary Center McKnight Artist Fellowship for Creative Prose (2009).
China and the United States. For instance, in “Subway Rhapsody” Wang humorously satirizes both worlds and demystifies American dreams and success (Xu 2000). *The Last Communist Virgin* is another collection of short stories. It picks up some threads in *American Visa*, such as immigrant’s experiences, and further reflects on the relationship between the homeland and immigrant life. In this book, Wang starts to distance herself from other narratives of the Cultural Revolution by overseas Chinese writers by giving more attention to the meaning of being a foreign-born Chinese immigrant and the attraction of the homeland. It juxtaposes modern China with Chinese American experiences.

Wang’s first poetry collection *Of Flesh and Spirit* imagines and visualizes how her female ancestors might have experienced and felt about foot binding. It is filled with anger and bitterness. By using the main thread of foot binding, she relentlessly critiques the repressive nature of Chinese traditions and patriarchal ideology that seek eroticism in women’s sufferings. Wang’s second poetry collection *The Magic Whip* experiments with poetic forms and style by writing prose poetry. Themes in this collection range from “the black pigtail” -- long braided hair-- to foot binding and to immigrant life in New York. It portrays certain ordeals (foot binding) Chinese women’s bodies have historically been through. It also uses hairstyles to demonstrate different cultural expectations of the Chinese female body and makes hairstyles a political issue of social and ethnic identity.

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70 Many overseas Chinese writers focus more on narrating their experiences during the Cultural Revolution while Wang Ping positions her works in two worlds. Therefore, they not only demonstrate how the past and the present for post-1965 Chinese American immigrants are closely related in identity constructions.
The book received the Gustavus Myers Center for the Study of Bigotry and Human Rights Outstanding Book Award Honorable Mention in 2004.

Wang’s short stories and poetry draw on the Chinese female body to explore the meanings of being a Chinese woman traversing different worlds. The body in these works is not only the Foucauldian docile body in China but also the rebellious, exotic, transnational body in the individualist culture of the United States. This body is the new sent-down body (yangchadui) that registers different history and culture. Many previous sent-down youths were able to move overseas as students or immigrants after the Cultural Revolution, and the term “sent down” was used to describe a different type of “sent-down” experience, meaning yangchadui (overseas sent-down youths).

In Wang’s works, previous sent-down youths’ experiences are part of these youths’ new sent-down experience as immigrants. Therefore, their bodies assume cultural meanings associated with immigration. Different parts of their bodies in Wang’s works, then, become a trope of gender, race, and ethnicity. The following discussion will focus on three major experiences of the female sent-down body. First, the sent-down body in Wang’s works is constructed around the sexual discourse of the Mao era as well as through the experience of immigration. Second, it is stigmatized and eroticized in a short story “Fox Smell.” In this story, what is a common medical problem (bromodrosis) becomes associated with ethnicity. Third, body hair connects history with race in ethnic identity constructions.
Seeing through the Window: Young Female Body as Witness

Like Min and Chen, Wang also uses the female body to represent different aspects of sexual experiences during the Cultural Revolution. This is best demonstrated in American Visa and The Last Communist Virgin. In a few short stories, Wang focuses on an apartment compound for navy officers and their families in a big city and uses a teenage girl’s point of view to reveal how sexual desires are controlled by the state while adults in the compound try to secretly fulfill those desires. What makes Wang’s works different from other Chinese immigrant women’s writings is how she presents a world of political and social chaos through teenage girls’ eyes. These girls not only go through their own sexual awakening at a time without sex education but also witness dilemmas adults have in terms of sexual identities.

As discussed in other chapters, all bodies during the Cultural Revolution were supposed to be gender neutral, covered with similar colors (green, blue, grey, brown, or beige). Sexual desires were erased from the public view and the government promoted politically correct heterosexual relationships. Feminist scholar and historian Emily Honig argues in “Socialist Sex” (2003):

Issues of sexuality were not placed high (if anywhere) on the Cultural Revolution’s agenda, and state policies and proclamations did not generally concern themselves with issues of sexuality. The state did, however, withdraw from its own earlier -- albeit limited -- participation in a discussion of sexuality. So, for example, government-sanctioned booklets and manuals about female hygiene, marital relations, and sexual health, which had some circulation during the 1950s and early 1960s, were no longer published. (146)
While Honig discusses collective silence about sexual issues during the Cultural Revolution, she does not delve into ways individuals react to the silence. Oral histories, memoirs, and studies of the Cultural Revolution reveal that people still engaged in sexual activities under the radar -- romance, rape, co-habitation among many sent-down youths, pregnancy, same-sex relationship, to name a few.

In Wang’s two short story collections, *American Visa* and *The Last Communist Virgin*, a teenage girl’s observation of an apartment compound for navy officers and their families illustrates the tension and contradictions state-controlled sexual discourse creates. To begin with, the female body is in the public view and put under surveillance in accordance with traditional views of proper behavior particularly of women. “Revenge,” the second short story in *American Visa*, tells how Captain Young’s wife Aunt Young is a target of mockery and humiliation because of her beauty and her sexual desires. She is first criticized for being a fox spirit that seduces and sucks men dry. Seaweed overhears adult women gossip and complain to each other that they do not “want to suck their husbands like that fox spirit did,” (16) like Aunt Young. They, together with their husbands, talk about “the chamber affair” (16) -- sexual intercourse -- of Young and her husband, all thinking that Mrs. Young wears her husband out because of her sex drive. When she is caught sleeping with a clerk in her office after her husband has been away for seven months, she gets a nickname *Sha Bi* (silly cunt). Women and children in the compound give her this name, which serves as a stigma that is equivalent to the scarlet letter “A” forced upon Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet
Letter (1850). The affair and the stigma make Mrs. Young vulnerable to public humiliation. While Mrs. Young is held responsible for the affair, her lover seems to have disappeared from the public view. People believe that Mrs. Young, a fox spirit, has seduced him. Although the state promotes gender equality, traditions die hard and women are usually subjected to harsh criticism for what society deems as unacceptable behavior. The language residents in the compound use to judge Mrs. Young’s is exemplary of traditional values regarding affairs. It speaks to a moral issue instead of a political concern for Chinese people in general. Mrs. Young is married to the right man but her affairs with another man ruin her reputation, not her husband’s or her lover’s.

Wang also uses a teenage girl’s point of view, the imagery of red poppies, and the bathroom window to reveal an unfathomable adult world full of desires and violence. In her eyes, pleasure, desires, and violence co-exist during the Cultural Revolution and form undercurrents of sexual activities at the time -- the complexities of sexual desires and various means to fulfill those desires. The story “Where The Poppies Blow” in The Last Communist Virgin appears to describe the narrator’s growing experiences as a girl and her obsession with a small garden of poppies, but it is actually about pleasure, desire, and violence seen through the thirty-four bathroom windows in the apartment compound of the narrator’s residence. The windows provide a closer look at sexual lives behind the public scene. The narrator’s view through the windows, similar to that in Hitchcock’s 1954 Rear Window, reveals scenes of love, suspense, and violence.

In “Where the Poppies Blow,” the narrator, while trying so hard to protect the poppies she has accidentally discovered, happens to see things many adults do not see --
things in the “thirty four apartments through the bathroom windows” (24) -- when she walks around the apartment compound. Although the view is limited, she discovers many secrets, which ironically interrogate state silence about sexual identities.

The first secret the narrator discovers is when she sees through her friend Shi Hua’s bathroom and finds Shi Hua’s parents having sex there:

I noticed the closed bathroom door. I looked down and almost fell off the wall. Hua’s father, a round-faced, good-natured officer with a pot-belly who every kid in the compound called Fat Uncle Shi, was sitting naked on a chair, facing his tiny wife. She was squatting over the toilet hole, her skinny behind sticking out from her white shirt. Fat Uncle Shi was playing with something brown and rubbery between his legs. It looked pathetically tiny under his towering stomach. What was he doing? (25)

Here the narrator clearly does not comprehend what is happening in the bathroom. She feels surprised, curious, a little bit scared, and embarrassed at the same time. The public image the couple usually presents is disrupted by what they do in the bathroom. At a time when teenagers have no sex education and state media erase any possible demonstration of affection (the first filmic scene of kissing and hugging in contemporary China was shot in 1979 but it lasted for only a few seconds)\(^\text{71}\), it is no wonder that the narrator should be overwhelmed by the love scene. The scene also shows that Fat Uncle Shi and his wife are like other people with desires, irrespective of state silence about “personal life in general and sexuality” in particular (Honig 145).

\(^{71}\) The film *Sheng Huo De Chan Yin* (*The Thrill of Life*) is about two lovers’ experience in 1976, after Premier Zhou Enlai passed away and there was a mass mourning on the Tiananmen Square that led to a protest against The Gang of Four headed by Mao’s wife. The first film that shows the nude body was shot in 1988.
Besides the love scene in Fat Uncle Shi’s bathroom, the narrator also sees frustrations because of erectile dysfunction in Mr. Chief’s bathroom. While the previous scene shows Fat Uncle Shi’s control of his wife’s body, Mr. Chief, who is considered “the most promising officer in the compound” (27), appears to suffer from impotence, an embarrassing and a shameful medical condition for men. He seems to try to please his wife but fails. She looks very furious, screaming, “’You good-for-nothing!’ She shouted in her falsetto, pushing him on the floor, tears flooding down her white cheeks. ‘Am I supposed to live like a widow for the rest of my life?’” (27). To the narrator’s surprise, the husband “embraced his wife’s feet to his chest, then, sucked her toes one by one” (27).

Putting the two scenes together, the narrator wonders, “Why did adults look and act one way in the public, another way behind doors? Were my parents like that, too?” (27). Her confusion arises because she is unable to match prescribed acceptable behavior with what happens in a very private space such as the bathroom. In the meantime, because of a missing public sexual discourse, the narrator fails to understand that pleasure and pain are part of the adult life and there are certain sexual norms in the adult world that are suppressed by the state.

The teenage girl also witnesses violence through the window. During the Cultural Revolution, sexual violence was not uncommon. Many reports and studies of sexual violence focus on rape of the female body. In Wang’s short stories, however, child sexual abuse is implied in “Where the Poppies Blow.” This is unseen in other works about the Cultural Revolution. In this short story, there is the sudden death of Mr. Fu’s seven-year-old son in Unit 14. The Fu family and Mr. Chief are next-door neighbors.
The narrator greets and talks with Mr. Fu’s son, Honeydew, briefly on her way to check the poppies and invite him to join her. He declines and stays in the bathroom, reading a banned book. On the way back, the narrator wants to stop by to say hi again, and this is what happens:

I peeked into the window with caution, just in case. For an instant, I thought I had passed Unit 14 and stopped at the window of Unit 13 because I saw Mr. Chief’s ghostly pale face. He was kneeling on the floor, sweat pouring down his squeezed-shut eyes. He was jerking back and forth in a violent motion, as if riding a horse. I’d never seen anyone going to the bathroom like this. And why was he doing it in Honeydew’s place? I wanted to take a good look when Mr. Chief opened his eyes suddenly, all white, staring at me like two daggers. I scurried away as fast as my shaking legs allowed. (30)

This scene makes Wang’s readers wonder why Mr. Chief is in his neighbor’s bathroom and what he is doing there. A few hours after the narrator returns home, she hears people scream and learns that Mr. Fu’s son is dead. She has obviously witnessed a murder but who will believe her if she tells the entire compound what she has seen?

Honeydew’s death has certain ambiguity. For instance, given the limited view the narrator has, there might be multiple ways of interpreting the following verbs -- “kneeling,” “jerking,” and “riding.” These could be a few common words used to describe sexual activities. Although they point to action, it is unclear who is underneath Mr. Chief. They imply, however, Mr. Chief’s victim is small, short, and weak. This scene also answers the question of Mr. Chief’s erectile dysfunction when he is with his wife in his own bathroom. If he has a sexual interest in young boys, this explains his lack of interest in his wife. He, however, remains married to her because of the social norm,
knowing that his dark secret stays in the closet. He will probably never come out, given
the unfriendly public sexual discourse about homosexuality. Honeydew’s death remains
a mystery, and Mr. Chief’s dark secret remains unrevealed.

Teenage girls not only witness sexual activities and violence but also experience
their own sexual awakening in Wang’s short stories. Once again, at a time without sex
education or proper guidance from parents, young girls learn about their bodies while
growing up. For them, growing pains are not only physical but also psychological. They
expect to see their “ghost,” euphemism for menstruation, and want boys to like them.
They also want to have big breasts and have body curves. “Crush,” one of the short
stories in The Last Communist Virgin, shows how the fictional “I” is eager to welcome
her menstruation to “grow up” and catch up with her younger sister who has already had
her first “ghost” visit (44). She is even jealous of her sister, “Soon my sympathy turned
into jealousy as I watched her waddling to show off what was going on between her legs,
and her whispering to friends about her monthly visit by the ‘old ghost’” (45). This first
shows a teenage girl’s desire for physiological maturity without knowing what it means.
Having what peers have or doing what peers do seems to be popular among teenage girls,
even during the Cultural Revolution, when jealousy or competition of this kind was
criticized.

However, there is a lack of parental guidance when teenage girls start puberty. In
“Crush,” the narrator’s sister begins menstruation without informing their mother, who
does not bother to check on her until after finding out about “the ghost” visit. The sister
has to sew “layers of cloth to her underwear to absorb the blood, until one day mother
saw the thickly padded shorts and threw a pair of rubber panties at her” (45). Even then, the mother does not educate the sister how to take care of her body or give her some basic knowledge of girls’ puberty. Therefore, both the state and parental silence about a sexual discourse affects how Chinese youths cope with growing pains during the Cultural Revolution. Lack of parenting also hinders female youths’ smooth transition into womanhood physically and mentally.

Wang Ping’s use of teenage girls’ point of view and coming-of-age experiences open up more possibilities to reconstruct sexual identities during the Cultural Revolution. First, children’s visions of the world are full of codes they themselves cannot decipher. The narrator in “Revenge,” “Where the Poppies Blow,” and “Crush” tells what she sees through the bathroom windows, taking her readers into the adult world that is full of desire, pursuit of pleasure, and violence that she herself does not understand. Second, the narrator’s generation grew up and came of age during the Cultural Revolution, and their experiences of state silence on a sexual discourse and sex education affect their adult lives in the post-Cultural Revolution era. Therefore, physical and mental growing pains represented in some of Wang’s short stories demonstrate Chinese young adults’ lives in a specific historical moment.

While urban teenage girls grow up in the complex manifestation of sexual activities, girls in the countryside have to battle strict traditional expectations of them. This is not to say that city girls do not have to assume certain gender roles to help take care of their siblings or do chores. Rather, girls in rural areas have a harsher reality
where traditions die hard.\textsuperscript{72} It is very ironic that Confucian gender politics were still dominant, whereas Mao’s administration made an effort to liberate women by granting them legal rights to education and marriage. The Marriage Law of 1950 made it clear that women were protected from forced or underage marriages. It also legally granted women equality with men in terms of choosing their partners.

\textit{Poster removed because of copyright.} \textsuperscript{73}

This poster of a free marriage in the early 1950’s shows a couple standing side by side, with the new marriage law in the background. They wear red paper flowers on their left chest and each holds a copy of their marriage certificate. Their smiling faces are evidence of a happy marriage that is not arranged. They show the public what true happiness is when they have freedom of love. Nevertheless, rural areas had much resistance against women’s freedom to love and choose their partners. Patriarchal oppression of women still took place, in the form of forced marriages and domestic abuse.

Wang, as a sent-down city girl during the Cultural Revolution, draws on her own experiences and tells a sad story of a village girl through Seaweed’s voice in “The Story of Ju” in \textit{American Visa}. The story demonstrates how hard it is to eliminate traditions that oppressed women for thousands of years. It uses Lishao village as its setting and portrays

\textsuperscript{72} Onesto Li suggests, however, that the Cultural Revolution liberated Chinese women completely. Historically, Chinese women were oppressed but Mao’s new system of People’s Commune, Day Care Centers, and Public Cafeteria liberated them from household chores. He believes that Chinese women had a very high social status at the time. Refer to The “Rediscovering China’s Cultural Revolution” Symposium held at New York University, December 12-14, 2008 for details. Web. 24 Nov., 2009. <http://rwor.org/i/150/GPCRleafletV7.pdf>.\textsuperscript{73}The title of the poster is “Freedom of marriage, happiness and good luck” (1953). Web. 24 Nov., 2009. < http://chineseposters.net/themes/marriage-law.php>.\textsuperscript{73}
a fourteen-year-old girl’s resistance against a forced marriage, which leads to her death. The girl, Ju, is married to a blind man in an affluent village in exchange for a wife for her stepbrother. During the Cultural Revolution, there were also exchange marriages in the countryside because some families were too poor to pay a bride price or dowry. In “The Story of Ju,” Ju has her dreams of education and refuses to be in the arranged exchange marriage. Leaving Seaweed -- her teacher-- a letter, she commits suicide. She writes in the letter, “I’m just a commodity in a trade deal. But I’m not going to let it happen. I’m not for sale” (36). Nonetheless, her resistance led to her death instead of saving her for her own dreams. When she died, she had “around her waist Andersen’s Fairy Tales” (39). The book was her favorite and she dreamed of being a mermaid some day.

The story of Ju and her tragedy complicate sexual politics during the Cultural Revolution on different levels. It demonstrates how liberation of women during the Mao administration was very limited for women, especially in the countryside. Women in rural areas neither enjoyed the freedom the state had promised to give them -- education -- nor had the freedom to select spouses. After Ju’s death, villagers blame education for triggering the death. They complain that “The books had made her think too much. They blinded her eyes and turned her into a fool” (39). Collective denial of education for girls and enforcement of forced young marriages in the countryside reinforced traditional gender expectations, and relentlessly challenged Mao’s political agenda to liberate women in all occupations.

Wang’s representations of sexual identities during the Cultural Revolution are primarily through teenage girls’ eyes that witness different forms of violence against
young and female bodies. They also portray various expressions of desires of adults and young adults. Moreover, they show the complexity of sexual politics in the city and the countryside. Wang makes it clear that human desire is omnipresent, irrespective of age and social or political status and people tend to try every means to fulfill their desires, which inevitably leads to violence when the state silences a sexual discourse. In the mean time, gender equality under the Mao administration is challenged by the Confucian construction of gender politics, particularly in the countryside. Therefore, sexual experiences during the Cultural Revolution should be examined in relation to the political agenda and Chinese traditions and cultures.

**The Sent-Down Body in a New Era: Transnational Sexual Identity**

The female sent-down body in Wang’s works is redefined in the post-Cultural Revolution era, particularly in relation to immigration. It becomes the body of *yangchadui* (sent-down youths living overseas) and is redefined as a sexualized ethnic body in female bonding and a medical condition -- body odor -- as well as hair that is ethnicity-specific.

In *The Last Communist Virgin*, Chinese female *yangchadui* (overseas sent-down youths) construct their sexual identities against one another or in their relationships with men. The book portrays dilemmas of national and personal identity facing Chinese immigrant women. It pinpoints painful fulfillments of repressed sexual desire by interweaving history, culture, and Chinese immigrant women’s harsh life. Some major female characters in the book survived the Cultural Revolution and moved to the United
States. In the new country, they are labeled, however, as “Communist Virgins,” a term with both political and sexist implications. The book shows how these characters are trapped between their past and present and in a new power discourse based on their national origins and sexual identities. It also reveals their endeavors to subvert images of “the Communist Virgin” and construct new identities as immigrants from China.

With the economic reform initiated by Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997) in 1979, China started to see economic, social, and political changes. Chinese people, who were under strict state control for three decades, were able to make change in their best interests. Many sent-down youths during the Cultural Revolution returned to school beginning 1977, became successful businesspeople and leaders at all ranks. Some moved to other countries to join overseas Chinese for various reasons. It is in this context that two major female characters in Wang Ping’s short stories “The Last Communist Virgin” and “Forage” -- Wan Li and Jeanne Shin -- leave China, become new immigrants in New York, and turn a new page in their lives. Although they share a recent past that denies personal pursuit of happiness, career, and sexuality, they take different routes to fulfill their dreams in a city full of desire, money, and crimes. Through the characterization of Wan Li and Jeanne Shin, Wang provides two different cases of Chinese immigrant women’s lives. The two characters are friends in New York but they have different interpretations of life and sexual identities in the big city and even become rivals to a certain extent. Wang uses first-person narratives in the two stories and makes Wan Li and Jeanne Shin tell their own stories and perceptions of each other.
Their stories first reveal the complexity of the female relationship between female immigrants. Although they are supposed to nurture sisterhood and certain bonding, they become rivals when living in a city full of material abundance and desires. Jeanne Shin is not as smart as Wan Li, but she is aware that a woman’s appearance is a component of her sexual attractiveness and desirability. In order to beat Wan Li in looks, she makes demeaning remarks about Wan Li’s body. She uses words such as “poor country bumpkin,” “bony body,” “totting pumpkin face, or “garlic stink” (63) to show that Wan Li’s out-of-the-standard looks disqualify her from any possible relationships. Jeanne Shin also gives Wan Li the nickname “the Communist Virgin,” an ironic combination of political rigidity and traditional expectations of a woman in China. Both indicate a denial of individual desires in China. On the one hand, the Chinese Communist Party propagates personal sacrifice, criticism of individual desires, and simple life. On the other hand, Chinese traditions expect women to remain virgins before marriage. However, communism and virginity have derogatory meanings in urban America, especially cosmopolitan cities such as New York. The legacy of the Cold War still equates communism with evil and being a communist makes Wan Li less desirable. In the meantime, as Wan Li reflects in the short story “The Last Communist Virgin,” “In the city of desire [New York], being a virgin was a joke, a sin” (Wang 69). She has to hide the fact that she is a virgin in order not to be mocked. The name, needless to say, spreads quickly on the campus. Wan Li later responds to the nickname and comments:

When Jeanne Shin gave me that nickname, she had no idea she had accidentally put her finger on two secrets: I had joined the Communist Party at sixteen, and I had never been with a man. As the nickname spread on campus, I became more and more nervous. I had lied to get into
America, and if someone reported me to the INS, I’d be sent to prison and deported. Soon, I realized that nobody had taken it at face value. People called me “Communist Virgin” because I am from Red China, still dressed like a peasant, and still looked uptight and awkward. (81)

To some extent, “Communist Virgin” has become a double-edged sword that not only brings frustrations to her in her relationship but also makes her into a mysterious and an exotic woman in the eyes of others.

Wan Li first tries to find her new self through appreciating her own body. In “The Last Communist Virgin,” Wang Ping uses an “orange silk dress and a blue cashmere jacket” and “the mirror” (74) to portray Wan Li’s reexamination of her body and boost of her ego. Genji, a Japanese immigrant, is her landlord. He gave her the dress and the jacket. Albeit a surprise, she is willing to try them on in her own bedroom and has a moment of awakening that helps her find her new identity. The color of orange usually symbolizes warmth, energy, or socialization while blue implies calmness. Orange stirs in Wan Li a desire to explore her own body, and the desire is fulfilled through the mirror in her bedroom. The mirror helps boost her ego by projecting her own body image on her. She tries on the orange silk dress and glances “in the mirror,” and, for the first time, starts to notice her “swelling breasts and butt” and the body curves that are “like distant islands on the horizon,” to use words by Jeanne Shin and Peng Chen, Wan Li’s boyfriends (75). Although she is excited at seeing her own body image, she is embarrassed. She says, “It was embarrassing to stare at oneself. When I was in China, I never owned a mirror, not even a hand mirror. There were bathroom mirrors in the apartments I had rented here, but they were small, filthy, cracked and blurry. This was the
first time I had looked at myself so shamelessly” (75). She then wonders, “Could a simple dress really transform me?” (75) For her, the dress and jacket have become part of her new identity. She says, “They had transformed me from a toad into a swan. That was what everybody had told me. Beauty was addictive” (79).

Wan Li’s past association with the Communist Party makes it difficult for her to establish herself in a new context. She became a Communist Party member at the age of 16 in China. She practiced self-denial of personal desires in China, but wants to act like every other woman in New York. She is cautious about her body being touched when she dates Peng Chen, a rich Chinese playboy on campus, but also wants to lose her virginity to him. However, Peng Chen is scared at her being a real virgin when they try to engage in some sexual activity on one occasion. He freezes in the middle of undressing her when she tells him that she is a real virgin, and says, “You can be really funny, Wan Li. But it’s bad timing. There’s no such a thing as a virgin nowadays. Not in New York” (82). She silently pleads, “Please don’t stare at me like this, I’m not a monster. Please take me and make me normal like every other girl!” (82), but he loses interest in any further action. Her virginity makes her untouchable in his eyes. He apologizes and says, “I am sorry. I almost ruined a rare treasure” (83). Wan Li, on the other hand, hates the word virginity, as it has become a “curse, the butt of a joke” and makes her feel “like a dinosaur, a living fossil” (83). After the truth comes out, Peng Chen treats her “like a queen, a doll made of fragile jade. No more crude jokes, no more groping or licentious words” (84). What is considered a virtue back in China has turned
against her in New York, serves as a wall between them, and hinders her pursuit of happiness, desire, and love.

Peng Chen leaves Wan Li to co-habit with Jeanne Shin for some time. Even though Shin tries to make him propose to her, he obeys his mother who lives in Taiwan and agrees to marry a woman his mother selects for him. Two years after Wan Li and Peng Chen break up; they meet again right before he goes back to Taiwan. They still love each other but he has to obey his mother, and, in the meantime, he still finds it hard to accept Wan Li being a Communist Party member. For the first and the last time, they have sex, after which they bid each other farewell. Eventually, love does not bring them together for good, but it does make Wan Li conceive of a baby without Peng Chen’s knowledge. Wan Li finally transforms herself by overcoming the sin associated with virginity in New York.

In her stories, Wang Ping makes female bonding an uneasy issue for Chinese immigrant women, as the conflict of interest is so real. Jeanne Shin treats Wan Li very nicely when they first meet in New York. Wan Li considers her a friend, and even takes her mockery lightly. However, Jeanne Shin is very practical and down to earth. She goes after personal happiness by throwing herself on different rich men while Wan Li wants to work her own way up. Wan Li says the following about Jeanne Shin, “She was a real Shanghai girl: sophisticated, metropolitan, and beautiful, someone who knew how to dress, eat and entertain. Peng had shaken his head and said Jeanne Shin was every man’s mistress” (101). Jeanne Shin makes demeaning remarks about Wan Li’s body and makes fun of her by giving her the nickname Communist Virgin because she feels insecure and
threatened by Wan Li’s smartness and diligence. She is never a good student and her best score at Hunter College was a C. As soon as she sees Wan Li, she notices something unusual about her. “The moment I set my eyes on her, I smelled the beast and knew it would jump out and tear up everything I had built” (120).

Wan Li, on the other hand, never treats Jeanne Shin as a potential rival until after Jeanne Shin and Peng Chen get together. She asks herself, “Was she my friend? Would a friend spy on me in order to steal my lover?” (101). Even though Jeanne Shin dates Peng Chen after he and Wan Li break up, she is never his true love. Two years later, Peng Chen tells Wan Li that Jeanne Shin is “a good fighter. . . . But a good fighter doesn’t always win the war, especially the war of love” (115). He makes a compromise with his mother and never proposes to Jeanne Shin, as she expects.

Unlike Wan Li in “The Last Communist Virgin,” Jeanne Shin in “Forage” represents another side of Chinese immigrant women’s experiences. Unlike Wan Li, she is not a good student and does not “give a shit about grades,” thinking, “Even a Masters degree was a total waste of [her] time” (120). She believes that her “body is [her] biggest capital, and every man wants a share. So [she makes] the best use of it” (125). She likes to fight for what she wants, and keeps a copy of The Art of War (sunzibingfa) to study tactics of fighting different battles. Unlike Wan Li, she inherits a history of courtesans in her family. She “was the great-granddaughter of famous courtesan” (122). She believes that this affects how she examines her own sexual history. Instead of being a virgin during the Cultural Revolution in China, she was sexually violated by her uncle in the park behind Shanghai Opera House on her thirteenth birthday. It was followed by more
violations from different men. At that time, she had to be silent, for fear of being disowned, strangled, or burned by her mother and her family.

Jeanne Shin’s traumatic past makes her aware of what a woman can do in the world of men. She knows that her body can please men because she thinks she carries the bad genes of being a whore. According to a Chinese saying, “Once a whore, always a whore” (125), she feels doomed to be like her great-grandmother. She is further aware that her body has exchange values after she gets to New York. The first night she is in New York, she gives consent to White Tiger, an acquaintance from Shanghai currently living in New York, who has wild sex with her. He usually sponsors some young Chinese women as immigrants or students, takes advantage of them when they are in desperate need of help after they get to New York, and coerces them to have sex with him so that they can stay in his basement.

For most immigrants to the United States, a green card is the only pass for them to stay permanently. Some women want to take a short cut by marrying U.S. citizens to get a green card. Jeanne Shin takes advantage of a professor’s son, a white young man, and gets married to him. While they both know they do not love each other, they get what they want from each other -- a green card and the exotic Chinese female body. For her, life is “all about survival. The most beautiful get power, money, social status, food, sex, health, even longevity” (136). She knows how to play games to survive in the United States. Love gives way to needs. She fails her battles, and is haunted by homesickness at the end of the short story.
In “The Last Communist Virgin” and “Forage” Wang Ping portrays different Chinese immigrant women’s experiences, journeys they take in relation to their historical and cultural experiences. Their bodies are controlled in different ways in the two cultures. While they have power over their own bodies upon immigration, they sometimes are unable to break away from objectified and sexualized constructions of Chinese women’s bodies. The two stories demonstrate that not all Chinese immigrant women share similar experiences or are successful. The only similarity they have with each other is that of fulfilling dreams of a better life in the United States, a country that lets them down in different ways. She leaves one ambiguity about Wan Li and Jeanne Shin at the end of “Forage.” Jeanne Shin says, “Then Virgin speaks. She speaks in the dialect we were both born into and grew up with, the dialect I’ve shunned for six years but now is breaking every floodgate in my heart. ‘I’m going to Shanghai, Ji Xing (her Chinese name). Would you go with me, with us?’” (146). The home that pushes Wan Li and Jeanne Shin away is now pulling them back. Are they going to Shanghai and stay there permanently or visit temporarily? The end of “Forage” makes Wang’s readers rethink the relationship between homeland and the adopted country when they examine immigrants’ experiences.

While Wang explores meanings of immigration through these women’s experiences, she is also very specific about the sent-down body as stigmatized and eroticized in her story “Fox Smell,” also called bromidrosis in English and huchou in Chinese. First, what is a common medical condition in China is historically gender-based. Second, as a medical condition generally seen among dark-skinned people in the
world, it turns into an “ethnic disease” in America, which complicates Chinese female immigrants’ lives in *American Visa*.

Seaweed, the main character and narrator, moves to New York as a student in the 1980’s. It is only in New York that she has flashbacks of a medical condition that haunted her many years, when she was a teenager in China. It is bromidrosis or osmidrosis (excessive and unpleasant underarm perspiration), a disease directly related to the sympathetic nervous system. The system is located in the chest cavity and sends signals to sweat glands which in turn produce sweat. Some people have over-stimulated sympathetic nerves and sweat more than anyone else. The symptom is diagnosed as excessive sweating (bromidrosis or osmidrosis). Usually, hands, feet, and armpits are the three major body parts that have excessive sweating. Bromidrosis or osmidrosis frustrates many people worldwide. About three percent of the world population has it. It is more common among post-pubertal individuals. Treatments of this medical condition include surgery targeting sympathetic nerves and certain ganglia by ultimately terminating excessive sweating. The medical term is “sympathetic surgery.” While scars from the surgery are considered a stigma in China and are associated with unbearable body odor, they become symbolic of the exotic body in America, particularly portrayed in Wang Ping’s short story “Fox Smell.”

The story opens with Seaweed saying, “I have scars in the shape of maple leaves on each of my armpits. It was a shame, a girl with the fox smell” (99). The scars are

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74 For information on sympathetic nervous system and surgery of over sweating, refer to http://www.sciencedaily.com/articles/s/sympathetic_nervous_system.htm and http://www.sts.org/sections/patientinformation/othersurgery/hyperhidrosis/?CFID=23584929&CFTOKEN=40825058

165
from the “sympathetic surgery” -- a medical term for treating excessive sweating -- that removed her sweat glands because of excessive armpit sweating she had while she was in Shanghai. They not only remind her of the stigma inscribed upon her body in China but also make her an exotic Chinese woman in the eyes of her American boyfriends who are from different backgrounds but share a common image of exotic Chinese women. They are amused or amazed by the shape of the scars not the body odor but the scars remind her of a painful stage in her life. They connect her past, present more closely than ever, and define her in relation to each other (the following pictures show two different shapes of scars after the surgery).

*Images removed because of copyright.*  

Bromidrosis or osmidrosis is a chronic medical condition that embarrasses and tortures many Chinese men and women, and women in particular. Unpleasant body odor emitted from armpits because of over sweating makes women less desirable. It also lowers their self-esteem. There is a myth about the name hu chou (fox smell) in Chinese history. It is never clear how bromidrosis or osmidrosis is linked to the fox, even though the Chinese character hu (狐) is for the fox. Some Chinese researchers have done etymological and cultural studies of the relationship between the disease and the fox. For instance, some suggest that hu chou (fox smell) is not originally a Chinese term. In 1937, historian and researcher of ancient Chinese literature Chen Yinque (1890-1969) published his findings on fox smell. In his essay “Fox (hu) Smell and Mongols’ (hu)

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76 It is said that bromidrosis is more commonly seen among dark-skinned ethnic groups than others, and more women have it than men. check the bigger the better for some statistics;
Smell," he argued that bromidrosis is called *hu chou* (fox smell) because it is a disease carried over to China by *hu ren*, Mongols, whose body odor was strong and unpleasant. It was passed on to the Chinese people via interracial marriages. Historian Huang Yongnian (1925-2007) counter-argued that Chen’s findings only used resources from the Sui Dynasty (581-618) and the Tang Dynasty (618-907), whereas the use of *hu chou* (fox smell) had been documented before these two dynasties. Therefore, Chen’s explanation is not valid. Irrespective of their differences, the two scholars make it clear that bromidrosis has a long history in China, and it is a disease that frequently bothers modern Chinese people as well.

The first recorded treatment of bromidrosis in China indicates that Chinese people used applied ginger to the armpit to treat excessive sweating about 1630 years ago and Japanese people later adopted it. During the East Han Dynasty (25-22), it is said, that Liang Nüying, the would-be-empress, had to be checked for fox smell, together with other possible diseases before she was married to the Emperor Heng Di in 147. Currently, technology enables Chinese people to use internet sources to discuss the disease. There is a homepage with the name of China’s Hu Chou (fox smell) Net to provide Q & A for patients.\textsuperscript{77}

The body is a locus of social control as well as a medium of culture. This is also true in terms of representing fox smell in Chinese culture and literature. Fox smell, an unpleasant experience for many men and women, is more often associated with women than men. For instance, Concubine Yang Guifei (713-756) in the Tang Dynasty, one of

the four legendary ancient beauties in China, was said to have fox smell. She was also said to bathe in a hot spring in the city of Xi’an a few times a day and use perfume frequently to cover up her body odor. In fact, three other ancient beauties (Xi Shi, Wang Zhaojung, and Diao Chan) were also said to have problems with certain body parts: large feet, long neck, or small earlobes. Even though these legendary beauties were not perfect and had blemishes on their bodies, they were said to attract emperors with their looks and poise. Wang Ping refers to Concubine Yang Guifei in *American Visa* when Seaweed’s friend reassures her that the Concubine was still loved by Emperor Xuanzong even though she had fox smell. She also mentions the Concubine in *The Last Communist Virgin* when one character describes the main character as a fox spirit like the concubine.

Fox smell in women also appears in Chinese writers’ characterization of women, who become objects of discipline and control. For instance, in his novella *She is a Weak Woman* (1932), Yu Dafu (1896-1945) portrays Li Wenqing as a promiscuous female character, who represents unrestrained desire for sex and money. He describes her with a focus on her body odor, height, muscles, crooked nose, big mouth, and sexuality. In so doing, he created a female figure that is less desirable and unpleasant. Fox smell, then, is part of Yu’s characterization of an evil seductive woman. His portrayal of Li demonstrates how Chinese male writers participate in disciplining the Chinese female body in literary works. In his novella, then, fox smell is a synecdoche that connects women with fox spirits (*hu li jing*), a derogatory expression for dangerous, seductive, and enticing women, which is a common thematic focus in Chinese mythology, folktales, and literature.
In "From Red Guard to Right Guard: Hu Chou in Wang “Fox Smell”" (2003), Benjamin Huang analyzes fox smell by using Julia Kristeva’s idea of “the abject” -- “the impure, the unclean and the loathsome” (17-18). In the first half of his essay, he points out that “Seaweed’s fox smell is a prime example of the abject. The odor which she emits is a form of bodily waste which exists at the border of the ‘I’ and “not I”’ (18). His application, however, is very rigid because his interest in subjectivity does not account for the positioning of the female body in China. He aims to analyze how some scenes in the story fit in Kristeva’s module of the abject and ignores certain historical and cultural contexts in which fox smell is perceived in relation to gender and Chinese youths. Therefore, his interest in subjectivity does not account for the positioning of the female body in China’s historical and cultural contexts that are represented in Wang’s short story or explains what happens to Seaweed, the main character, upon immigration.

Fox smell in Wang’s short story “Fox Smell” is part of the characterization of Seaweed, but it moves beyond the Chinese context in which Concubine Yang Guifei or Li Wenqing is portrayed. It represents pain and pleasure that are simultaneously written on the same body, but in different contexts. In other words, what is pain and stigma for Seaweed in China later becomes pleasure for her American boyfriends. In East West Montague: Reflections on Asian Bodies in Diaspora (2008), Sheng-mei Ma argues, “The scars in Sea Weed’s armpits left by the surgical removal of her sweat glands and hence her odor are fetishized as an erotic turn-on by her American boyfriends” (87). Ma is right about American men having a fetish for Asian women, particularly their bodies, and therefore Seaweed’s scars become erotic after she moves to the United States. Ma fails to
point out, however, that in the Chinese context the scars represent a secret and a stigma. Therefore, Seaweed’s Chinese “boyfriends pretended not to see them,” since the fox smell “was a shame” for young women like Seaweed (Wang 99).

Wang’s readers learn that Seaweed’s pain starts with her puberty, a developmental phase that sees frequent occurrence of bromidrosis because of hormonal change, particularly in teenagers’ bodies. Although it is a common medical condition for many people between 13 and 40, Chinese families and society seem to stigmatize patients, especially women. Seaweed’s grandmother says that boys with fox smell can get away more easily than girls with the same disease. Before detecting fox smell (hu chou) in her body, Seaweed is already upset by her looks and all the chores she has to do because of her looks (her own assumptions). She is also upset because her pretty, arrogant, and spoilt sister Sea Cloud bullies her regularly without being punished by their mother. She uses a traditional Chinese term “swan sister” to indicate that Sea Cloud is her parents’ favorite kid in the family. Seaweed never feels she is loved as much as her siblings. When her sister Sea Cloud sniffs around her after smelling something odd and covers her “nose with a handkerchief,” pointing at her armpits and screaming “hao chou (very stinky)” (102), Seaweed is stunned. She thinks that the smell must have been from some chicken shit around. She is outraged because her pain is not only from fox smell but also from her failure to compete with Sea Cloud, her parents’ favorite daughter. She is also humiliated and ashamed to find out her body carries a stinky smell, which is impossible to wash off:

Seaweed backed out of the bathroom. I banged the door shut and turned on the shower. The cold water washed my body... my clothes... my
soul…if I still had one . . . I wouldn’t blame it if it had escaped . . . who wanted to be in this stinky shell . . . I was standing in the chicken shit . . . I was the chicken shit . . . hao chou . . . (103)

The traumatic scene of finding her own body smelly shows Seaweed in shock, shame, anger, and humiliation. She reads *Strange Stories in a Chinese Studio* by Pu Songling, a famous writer in the Qing Dynasty, and revisits his stories of seductive and beautiful female fox spirits and admires how they end up marrying intelligent men, whereas her only association with the word “fox” -- stinky smell -- makes her feel inferior. She laments, “God’s arrangement: [Sea Cloud] had the fox face, me the fox smell” (Wang 103). Even though her mother and grandmother secretly contacted a doctor who is criticized and denounced, and has limited freedom to practice medicine. They arranged for him to perform a surgery to remove the smell, the scars become a reminder of her fox smell.

In “Body Politics and the Body Politic” (2006), Edward Mallot suggests that “the human body can retain and reveal an individual’s past” (165). He further argues that memory and the body are closely linked, because

memory seems necessarily to reference the body, as each person’s recollection typically assumes the presence of their physical self: this is where I (my body) was, this is what I (my body) was doing, this is what happened to me (my body)” and, in a word, “there is no memory without body memory. (166)

In “Fox Smell,” bromidrosis and the psychological pain from the trauma stigmatize Seaweed and her body. Her self-esteem is still low after the surgery. She dares not wear short sleeves in the summer, in fear of showing the scars under her armpits. This even affects her friendship with Jian Ning, who is her “first and the only girlfriend” in college
It is painful for Seaweed to show the scars to Jian Ning who, however, does not make a fuss about them. Jian Ning even thinks of Seaweed as “a fox spirit, a man eater” (Wang 106). Seaweed, however, feels embarrassed and ashamed of being associated with fox smell. She pleads to Jian Ning by saying:

‘Jian Ning, please don’t make fun of me. I’m not a fox spirit, you know that. But it’s true I have the fox smell, or used to, but not anymore, I think. I had an operation. Look.’ As I lifted my arms, tears filled my eyes. I felt vulnerable, standing with my arms above my head, as if I were surrendering myself. Would my scars disgust my only friend? (107)

On the one hand, Seaweed is still haunted by the fox smell she had as a teenager; on the other hand, she wants to prove to Jian Ning that she does not carry that stinky smell any more, in fear of losing her friendship. What makes it more painful for her in this statement is that, when lifting her arms, she reveals her secret and feels vulnerable to mockery by her friend.

Although Jian Ning reassures her by referring to Concubine Yang Guifei’s fox smell that “enchanted the emperor” (Wang 107), Seaweed is still uncertain how there is a connection “between the fox smell and female attraction” (107). She wonders, “If the odor were really as enchanting as Jian Ning believed, why were there so many posters and ads for medicine to get rid of the fox smell?” (107). Here Seaweed implies that Jian Ning’s reassurance is only a gesture of her friendship and kindness, whereas both are aware that Chinese society and cultures expect the body to smell pleasantly and expect people to try every means to fix the body if it has any problems. Both know that society imposes more pressures on women with “fox smell” and makes their love lives more miserable if the problem remains.
As discussed earlier, after moving to New York, Seaweed has flashbacks of her fox smell and its impact on her self-esteem. Here her discovery of fox smell, Jian Ning’s interpellation of her as a fox spirit, and the operation her family arranges for her all take place in the narrative past. Benjamin Huang notes, “In the narrative present, the semiotic landscape shifts, and the story, which might have remained a simple supernatural tale set in China, has an added dimension of transnationality” because she becomes transformed “from a Chinese bearer of fox smell to a Chinese American fox spirit” (22). Huang’s study of Wang Ping’s “Fox Smell” calls attention to a transnational reading of fox smell not as a medical condition but as a site for Seaweed’s identity construction and reconstruction in two worlds: from a bearer of fox smell in China to a fox spirit in America. Nonetheless, he focuses mainly on the symbolic meaning of the scars -- political allegory or scar literature -- without probing further into how Seaweed’s transnational experiences are not enabling. That is to say, Seaweed is on the radar in both contexts. In China she is considered “a fox spirit, a man eater” by her friend Jian Ning (106), but she is identified as a “female fox” (112) by one of her boyfriends in America. He says, “A female fox is a kind of nymphomaniac, sucking men’s energy through sex” (112). Seaweed’s body odor and scars from the surgery somehow link her with erotic and seductive images of a female fox in the eyes of her American boyfriends. In both Chinese and American contexts Seaweed has no control over her body. What she tries to forget is constantly brought back to her memory, which further alienates her from her body.

While Seaweed lives in America, the scars from the surgery become exotic
objects for her American boyfriends and assume more meanings of fascination and eroticism. She is also redefined as a Chinese immigrant woman. Seaweed reflects:

My American boyfriends were fascinated by [the scars]. Oriental scars on the armpits. One liked to inspect them before and after sex, licking them, squeezing out the dirt that hid between the creases. One asked endless questions. What happened? Why, when, and where? One day, in a Moroccan restaurant where we had taken his friend Nick to celebrate his sixtieth birthday, my friend asked me to lift my arms to show Nick the scars. ‘They are amazing, really amazing,’ he told Nick in a proud tone, as if he had won a six-number lottery. (99)

It is the Orientalism inherent in Western cultures that makes Seaweed a desirable and an exotic Chinese immigrant in the United States, including her scars. Her American boyfriends do not really care about the disease and the smell. Instead, they are obsessed with the scars for their shape and the mystery behind them. They also show their ownership of the scars when taking Seaweed to gatherings or introducing her to their friends. While she tries to leave her past behind, her American boyfriends constantly remind her of the trauma she had in China. This also shows their determination to recover her past that characterizes her identity with an unspeakable medical condition. As fox smell is more common in China than in America, so her scars demonstrate the Chineseness inherent in this medical condition.78 In Seaweed’s case, her body is scarred physically and psychologically at the same time.

In America, Seaweed is transformed into an exotic fox spirit from China, moving from man to man, enchanting them with her flowery scars:

Within two years of living in New York, I had had relationships with four men -- one Chinese American, one Japanese-Irish hybrid, one Canadian

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78 Some studies indicate that bromidrosis is more popular among Asians and dark-skinned ethnic groups.
Jew, and one mixture of Puerto Rican, African, American, Chinese, Mexican, Portuguese. I broke up with them all, and broke their hearts, without the slightest hesitation or guilt, quite unlike the way I acted in China, where I had kept secret a relationship with a married man for five years. (110)

Her relationships with these men who are from different ethnic backgrounds are very interesting. The men’s own identities are also ethnically hybrid, but they share a common view of Chinese women. Instead of showing the cultural binary here, Wang disrupts the binary by introducing Seaweed’s relationships with them.

While in China, Seaweed denied what Jian Ning called her (fox spirit) as “Fox spirits never ended well” (Wang 110). Now she is transformed into a female fox by her American boyfriends, who admire and amuse themselves over her scars. Instead of obsessing about the shame and disgrace imprinted on her body, she is able to explore her identity in America that “delivers sexual liberation” (Ma 88). Nonetheless, she suffers from each relationship: one man lying about his marriages, one man being stingy, one man being impotent, and the last one blaming her for his penis problems. Their enchantment with her scars seems to aggravate her pain. It confirms her belief that fox spirits never end well and she would not want to be one of the spirits.

The way Seaweed’s American boyfriends eroticize her scars reflects a long history of eroticizing the Chinese female body in the United States. Historically, the Chinese female body was objectified and portrayed as exotic when Chinese women with bound feet were first exhibited in American museums in 1834 and 1847 and attracted
many visitors. This shows “one dimension of American popular culture that has endured until the contemporary period” (Mazumdar 47), which continues to eroticize and objectify Asian women in various ways -- small eyes, petite, smooth skin, to name a few. Therefore, Seaweed’s American boyfriends amuse themselves over the maple-shaped scars, deeming them as an irresistible part of Seaweed’s exotic body.

The body is a “metaphor for culture” (Bordo 165) and individualized bodies do not have “a fixed position.” These bodies circulate “in a network of relations” (Foucault 146). Fox smell in China carries more cultural and gendered meanings. While it is acceptable for men to have it, it is the opposite for women. Seaweed’s body is devalued because of her medical condition and the scars because of treatment. In America, however, it is admired because of cultural and political constructions of the Asian female body, and particularly the Chinese American female body. Therefore, Seaweed’s identity is not one dimensional. Instead, it is what Anzaldúa describes as two identities in one body. It is this bicultural nature of Seaweed’s body that provides implications for a further examination of Chinese immigrant women’s historical and cultural experiences represented in literary works.

Wang’s stories of Wan Li, Jeanne Shih, and Seaweed reveal that the female sent-down body is a very important symbolic site of immigrant identity construction for Chinese yangchadui. She also uses hair as a significant trope that integrates the past and present for Chinese immigrants. It is also gendered and racialized.

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79 See the chapter on Hung Liu for details.
Gloria Anzaldúa states in *Borderlands*, “People who inhabit [two] realities are forced to live in the interface between the two, forced to become adept at switching modes” of consciousness of being bicultural, bilingual, and mixed and of living two different realities and worlds (Anzaldúa 37). Although this is Anzaldúa’s reflection on living in two realities as a woman of mixed ancestry, her idea of living in two realities and “switching modes” of consciousness also helps interpret Wang’s focus on the Chinese female body living in two different worlds. For instance, hair in Wang’s works is not a simple part of the body. It represents how Chinese immigrants try to tie their past and the present in a new context, through identifying cultural signs such as hairstyles. It is also indicative of how Chinese immigrant women make adjustments to fit in two worlds and cultures. For Wang, hair is a trope for colonization, submission, rebellion, and alienation. It is also a site in which power and desire are fulfilled. In *Hair: Its Power and Meaning in Asian Cultures* (1998) Alf Hiltebeitel suggests that human hair never “exists in a natural state,” as it is located “in the socially and culturally normative” and is “a synecdoche for the whole body” as well (2-3). Put another way, hair and the body politics are closely related to reflect social realities, cultural expectations, and immigrant experiences. Wang not only uses history and culture to contextualize hair in Chinese history and culture, she also invites her readers to make more sense of Chinese immigrants’ experiences and history.

Hair (head hair and body hair) in Chinese history is gendered and politicized. For Chinese women, it measures a woman’s worth and informs her proper behavior. Wang Ping begins *The Magic Whip*, her second poetry collection, with a focus on the Chinese
female long ponytail and the Chinese male queue. She also refers to traditional expectations of female hair in *Of Flesh & Spirit*, the other poetry collection, and *American Visa*. She puts hair in historical and cultural contexts to demonstrate how hair is anything but personal. It is always saturated with gender and political implications.

In “The Magic Whip,” the title poem of *The Magic Whip*, Wang Ping shows to the reader that head hair symbolizes submission and colonization in Chinese culture and history. In this poem, norms of hairstyles are defined around gender and nationalism. For Chinese women, hairstyles traditionally help determine a woman’s virtue or identify women’s marital status. Married women combed their long hair back into a knot, which is similar to chignon but much simpler. Unmarried young women wore braided long hair (ponytail or pigtail), which requires good maintenance. In fact, Chinese men traditionally desire Chinese women with very long hair. The tradition started in Ancient China when female hair was discussed in many documents and literary works. For instance, a Chinese woman with long hair, seven feet in length, was highly desirable and adored. This means that Chinese men have an obsession with long hair, holding it as a symbol of femininity, attraction, beauty, and virginity.

The beginning of “The Magic Whip” reads:

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It is the mark of
a virgin,
the yellow blossom girl
men would bid
to deflower -- the black pigtail
that brushes its path
along the waist, hips, backs
of the knees, tied with
a ribbon or red yarn (9).
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These lines highlight what is embedded in the black pigtail. The color “black” symbolizes health and youth. “Blossom” refers to youth and virginity. Male control is dominant in these lines because men “would bid [a girl] to deflower.” The color “red” represents good luck, happiness, attraction or sacrifice, but “red yarn,” if contextualized, could signify symbolic bondage as well. The beginning of the poem sets a tone that Chinese women are expected to keep and present their bodies to Chinese men, who regulate and manipulate the ideas of proper womanhood represented in the female hair. Like bound feet, beautiful long hair is exotic in Chinese men’s eyes. In the same poem, the narrator’s lover tells her, “Keep your hair long/ if you want to find a man…. /if you cut it, you’ll have nothing left” (11). Here the female hair is linked to female desirability because Chinese men make long hair a standard of beauty and proper womanhood.

Growing up in a culture that holds single and young women’s long hair as a cultural norm, the narrator has internalized the norm. She tries every means to protect her hair, even when she has lice in her hair, refusing to shave her hair. “I was fifteen, had just left home to work on the village farm. I was determined to save my hair, at any cost” (9). In the poem “Female Marriage” in Flesh & Spirit, the narrator provides a similar attachment to long hair, saying, “When I was a kid, I was crazy about keeping my hair long. But my father cursed at me every time he saw me brushing it, and my mother chased me around with a pair of scissors (27).

Beautiful long hair, however, is not enough. Sexy and beautiful hair is not supposed to be tough. Tough hair, in opposition to soft hair, means bad luck and stubbornness in Chinese cultures. Women with tough hair are said to be unruly, less
attractive or desirable. They are even said to bring bad fortune to their husbands. Therefore, young girls’ hair is significant for their future relationships. Hair with lice is pathetic, because it has to be cut to get rid of the bug, whereas shaving or cutting long hair is deemed disgraceful and humiliating. In “The Magic Whip,” the narrator says, “Tough hair on a girl equals stubbornness equals disobedience equals bad luck” (11). Similar statements also appear in the poem “Female Marriage” in Of Flesh & Spirit. The narrator’s maternal grandmother (waipo) used to complain about her tough hair, “My Waipo used to weep when she brushed my hair. ‘What are you going to do, my baby? Your hair is too tough, so will be your fate” (26). It is ironic in the above two statements that hair is associated with a woman’s fate and temperament and can cause concerns about her future life, particularly her marriage. As a result, hair is not a natural part of the female body, it is symbolic of gendered expectations, which in turn create social and gender identities in Chinese cultures.

In “The Magic Whip,” Wang also calls the reader’s attention to traditional perceptions of women’s pubic hair. While some men and women in the Western culture shave their pubic hair, a Chinese woman without pubic hair, traditionally and culturally, means bad luck, even though it could be a medical condition (Addison’s Disease, Liver Cirrhosis, Pituitary Disease, etc.). “A woman without pubic hair is called a ‘white tiger’ - - a man killer” (10), because she is said to be sexually avaricious and can kill a man or bring bad luck to a man. Although superstitious at surface value, the expression “White Tiger” holds deep-rooted cultural biases toward Chinese women.
In “Opening the Face,” Wang draws on another instance to illustrate how body hair is gender related -- facial hair. Once again, what is not uncommon in the Western culture assumes different meanings in Chinese tradition. Traditionally, a bride has her facial hair waxed by an older woman to prove her marital status:

“Sit still,” she orders, twining
the cotton thread to test its strength.
“It hurts, but nothing like footbinding,
or the hardship of a newlywed.”
She pulls it through her teeth,
Lines it against my forehead.
Wet, cold, it furrows into the skin,
into the roots of my virgin down.
The uprooted hair hisses
After the twanging thread. (49)

“Now you’re ready for the big day.”
Her fingers trace along my cheekbones.
“Your face clean and open.
I’ll cover it with a red scarf.
The only person who can lift
the veil is your groom. (50)

The above two stanzas portray certain pains a Chinese woman goes through on the wedding day. Although it is not as painful as foot binding, it leaves a woman’s face like “a burning field” (50). The purpose of the ritual is to make the bride more attractive and beautiful to please the groom’s eyes. As it is not a norm for women to shave body hair in China, this ritual has more gendered meanings.

Long hair is not only historically a measure of femininity but also a means of practicing nationalism and political control to symbolically emasculate men of the Han, the largest ethnic group in China. Running parallel with the braided female long hair is
the male queue in “The Magic Whip.” In this poem, Wang uses it to draw parallel of submission and control: “No woman is allowed to bind her feet and every Chinaman must wear a queue, ordered the first emperor of Qing. / The laws of the Great Qing: removing a man’s queue is punishable by decapitation” (9-11).

In the two lines, Wang explicitly points to the fact that hairstyles are signs of assimilation and loyalty in the Qing Dynasty. The queue, first introduced to China in the 17th century by Nurhaci (1559-1626), the Manchu national founder. This hairstyle was significant because it not only symbolized the Manchu resistance against slavery but also helped them identify those of the Han who opposed to their domination of the Chinese state. Therefore, as a hairstyle that used to be seen on the Manchu men’s head, the queue became mandatory after the Manchus overthrew the Ming Dynasty and forced all men of Han to wear the queue, a sign of obedience, loyalty, submission, and assimilation for men of Han. A man without a queue deserved the death penalty.

Chinese American historian Weikun Cheng (1953-2007) examines “the role of men’s hair as a political symbol in China during the Qing and early Republic periods (1912-1920)” 80 in a book chapter “Politics of the Queue” (1998) included in Hair: Its Power and Meaning in Asian Cultures (1998). He argues, “change of hairstyle is a form of social control” (123). His study shows that hair is a tool in ethnic conflicts between the Manchu and Han during the Qing Dynasty.

After the Manchus established the Qing Dynasty, the Qing government regulated people’s hair and forced all men to wear the queue. They deprived men of Han of their

rights for hairstyles. Cheng further argues, “Like a woman’s bound feet, which embodied the physical and moral restrictions of women by men’s power, a Han male’s queue reflected the Manchus drive to submit Hans to the minority’s political and cultural hegemonies and its symbolic standardization of the people’s ideology” (124). In this sense, the Manchus colonized the Han body by putting the queue on Han men’s head.

The queue was banned when the 1911 Revolution (Xinhai Revolution) started.81 The revolution overthrew the Qing Dynasty and established the Republic of China. Chinese men had their queues cut off to show their loyalty to the new government. They also got rid of the Manchu robes. The queue and robes suddenly became associated with a non-existent government and, therefore, unacceptable loyalty to the old system. In “The Magic Whip,” Wang Ping points this out as well, “When the last Qing Emperor was dethroned, the New Republican soldiers patrolled the streets and shaved off men’s queues” (12). This is another form of state control.

Historically, men of Han had to wear or cut off the queue according to the government regulation, and this clearly demonstrates that hair is a focus of political and cultural conflicts. Before the Qing Dynasty, men’s long hair was tied to the Confucian ideology of piety. During the Qing Dynasty, it exemplified Manchu cultural dominance and political control. With the 1911 Revolution, short hair and modern dress replaced the queue and the Manchu robes. This elimination of the colonized past embodies “nationalism and Westernization” (Cheng 138).

81 The revolution (1911-1912) challenged imperial China and started China’s move toward democracy under Sun Yat Sun’s the Republic of China.
When early Chinese male immigrants arrived in the United States, their hair had political meanings as it did in China, but it was part of racist constructions and emasculation of Chinese immigrant men. The queue on the head and the robe on the body assumed racial meanings.

*Images removed because of copyright.*

Out of the Chinese context, they were alienated and despised because their hairstyles and clothing were symbolic of emasculation and femininity and were out of the norm in America.

Wang not only draws on long hair of Chinese women and men to convey historical and traditional meanings of gender and nationalism but also suggests that hair continues to be a locus of social and political control in Chinese history. Her poetry and short stories also present contemporary constructions of the hair. They tell the reader that in Maoist China hair assumed new meanings, particularly in the early years of the Cultural Revolution. At the time, long hair was considered part of corrupted bourgeois life styles. Many women were forced to cut their long hair for fear of punishment from the Red Guards, organized progressive young men and women. In *The Politics of China: The Eras of Mao and Deng* (1997), Roderick MacFarquhar states, “the Red Guards took to the streets looking for evidence of bourgeois culture. Young men and women wearing long hair were stopped on the streets and shorn on the spot. Women wearing tight slacks were subjected to the ‘ink bottle test’: If a bottle of ink placed inside the waistband could not slip freely to the ground, the pants would be slashed to shreds” (182). In the first

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short story in *American Visa*, Seaweed, the main character, says that “All the woman had short hair cut just below their ears. Some girls tied their hair with rubber bands into two brushlike pigtails. They were called revolutionary brushes because they resembled the brushes people used to write critical big-character posters” (1). Whatever length the hair had, it had to be tied by plain rubber binds, and no decorative hair pins were allowed. (The following painting by a famous Chinese artist Shen Hanwu (1950- ) shows typical brushlike pigtails during the Cultural Revolution).

*Image removed because of copyright.*

Seaweed is afraid of losing her long hair, “the only thing on which the neighbors ever complimented [her]” (8). The following lengthy quote from a short story in American Visa clearly demonstrates Seaweed’s fear and progressive young people’s obsession to get rid of bourgeois life styles:

Long braids, together with curly hair and colorful clothing, were considered the tails of capitalism at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. I still remember how the Red Guards patrolled the streets with scissors in hand and jumped at passersby who were wearing tight pants or long hair. After they cut open the legs of the pants or cut off the braids, the victims had to recite Mao’s words and express their sincere gratitude to the Red Guards for saving them from the horrors of capitalism. Although things had quieted down a lot, my long hair could still bring me trouble (8).

Hairstyles, together with other signs of bourgeois life styles, are closely regulated and controlled in the name of revolution and individuals, such as Seaweed, either are punished for being bourgeois or live in fear of punishment.

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83 Web. 24 Nov., 2009. <http://bbs.sogou.com/f?s=%C0%CF%D5%D5%C6%AC&t=TP%24Z01c7HCkeIBIBAAAA&page=1&p=02210112>.
In the meantime, Chinese traditions die hard and women are still criticized if their hairstyles are not in the norm. For instance, even though the Mao administration made an effort to eliminate feudalist ideology in terms of proper behavior of women, Chinese women are still evaluated in reference to traditional expectations of them. In “Revenge,” a short story in American Visa, Aunt Young becomes a target because her hairstyle is inappropriate for a middle-aged woman like her. People in the compound gossip about her, saying, “look at her two braids, women sneered at her back, doesn’t she realize she’s almost thirty-seven, a mother of two children?” (15).

What Wang does not mention about hair as political during the Cultural Revolution is that hair is a site of exercising punishment and humiliation. When Red Guards criticized so-called bourgeois members, they would give them yin yang haircuts, shaving half the head. Females also had half of their hair shaven off. Such humiliation was one of the worst at the time because, in the Chinese faith, “hair shaving had been a traditional form of penalty and made the shaved shameful” (Cheng 127).

In “The Magic Whip,” Wang combines history and her immigration experiences in telling the Chinese history of hair. The pigtail and the Cultural Revolution constitute a past the narrator leaves behind, whereas her present is in New York. In Hong Kong, before leaving for New York, the narrator eagerly “cut the braids she’d kept for fifteen years” (10), determined to disconnect herself from the history filled with humiliation and trauma. It is in New York that she has a lot of freedom to do her head hair and body hair, because the city has the freedom for hairstyles that she did not have in China. It is also in
the city that women collectively construct their ethnic identities through hairstyles, thus gaining a sense of community and female connection:

After midnight
the only lights are from the beauty
salons along DeKalb Avenue
of Brooklyn where they braid
each other’s kinky hair
laughing, slapping their thighs. (10)

As a new immigrant in New York, the narrator is unaware of the neighborhood where different races reside with their own kind. Neither is she aware that her admiration for “kinky hair” is also political and racist in tone as it is often applied to black women. Therefore, the poem describes that the narrator “got a perm at Midtown Hair” (12). This was almost impossible when she grew up in China, because curly hair was considered part of bourgeois lifestyle during the Cultural Revolution. A person with naturally curly hair would be criticized for being pro-Western. After the Cultural Revolution, more and more salons started to curl or perm Chinese women’s hair in the 1980’s and curly became very stylish at the time.

When the narrator in “The Magic Whip” took advantage of having her hair done in New York, according to her idealized image of hair, she found out the perm and hair-do she had is an “Afro cut” and was an object of jokes for her boyfriend. She had to go to a “Korean salon in Flushing, which straightened all the curls” (12) so she could wear braids again. Here, hair assumes racial and ethnic implications because American society tends to defines different ethnic and racial groups or even classes by their hairstyles. It also indicates the narrator’s efforts to assimilate herself quickly into the mainstream.
culture without realizing hairstyles are also political in meaning. The narrator’s ignorance of proper hairstyles actually poses a problem for her, that is, she has to define herself in a new context, where hair identifies race, ethnicity, and sexuality. Look at the following list of commodities for hair created in the poem. It ties female identities to hair, which is to meet with certain gendered standards:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hairpainting</th>
<th>Colorsilk</th>
<th>Natural Instincts</th>
<th>Nice ‘n’ Easy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Les Rouge</td>
<td>Nutrisse</td>
<td>Color Shock</td>
<td>Gray Chic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xtreme FX</td>
<td>Consort</td>
<td>Born Blond</td>
<td>Just for Men</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here Wang uses all the brand names for coloring to indicate that hair care or coloring is in demand. The list also shows how important it is for people in America to define who they are and what they want to be through hair care. These names conjure images of abundance, freedom, fashion, race, beauty, and gender, to name a few. They are used as rhetorical devices to reflect on the freedom of choice. They also point to the fact that, although the narrator is able to loosen or cut her hair now, she is trapped in a different culture that also ties hair styles to social norms, such as age, or stereotypes, race, or gender. At the end of “The Magic Whip,” the narrator goes back to where she started in her hairstyle because that is what she is expected to have: “Women constantly stop her on the street and say, / “I love your braid,/ Don’t ever cut it” (12).

The narrator in the poem tries so hard to criticize gender norms represented through hair when she resides in China. She also demonstrates how she is able to take advantage of all the freedom she could ever imagine in America by having her hair done, and yet her choices are still limited. With the freedom, she is denied certain styles
because she is defined in reference to her ethnic or racial affiliation. As a result, she is best represented by the long hair that characterizes Chinese women.

The Chinese female body in Wang Ping’s works assumes clear historical, political, and cultural meanings. It is a child’s female body that lives within a highly regulated private compound but also lives in the sexual discourse of adult desires during the Cultural Revolution. It is also a female sent-down body that witnesses rural Chinese women’s hopeless resistance against traditions. Moreover, it is a female sent-down body that crosses physical and symbolic borders as a transnational and transcultural immigrant body. As a new sent-down body (yangchadui), it connects its past in China and present in the United States. Wang’s literary constructions of this body weave gender, history, culture, immigration, and race together. Zhou Xiaojing suggests that “Asian American studies has seen a significant shift toward transnational perspectives and diasporic positionings” since the late 1980’s (3). My discussions in this chapter illustrate how Wang’s short stories and poetry respond to this significant shift. They also show my efforts to view how these texts make a transnational perspective possible. In particular, I discuss ways the female sent-down body connects Chinese history and culture with immigration and attempts to find new meanings in the United States. I argue that Wang grounds her works in different spectra of the sent-down body. This focus on the female sent-down body as the transnational immigrant body adds new lenses to study history, culture, and immigration that are embodied in the transnational Chinese female sent-down body.
Chapter 4: The Sexualized and Racialized Sent-Down Body in Self-Portraits

The Chinese female sent-down body, as a transnational and transcultural entity is also represented in paintings and self-portraits. Chinese immigrant woman artist Hung Liu draws on her sent-down experiences during the Cultural Revolution and her new sent-down experiences (yangchadui) in the United States to project transnational meanings of gender, race, ethnicity, and national origin. A former sent-down youth working in the countryside, Liu uses her own body in five self-portraits produced between 1988 and 2006 to weave her representation of the political history in the Mao Era with that of her immigrant identity defined in the frame of Chinese immigrant cultural history. These portraits show a former sent-down body at a critical juncture between the present and the past. They illustrate that Liu’s immigrant identity is shaped by political and cultural histories in two countries. In this chapter, I examine Liu’s five self-portraits with a focus on the female sent-down body in different geopolitical and

84 In 1991, Margo Machida, a New York-based Asian American artist, organized a symposium “(Re)ORIENTING: Self Representations of Asian American Women through the Visual Arts.” Among the participating artists were Tomie Arai (Japanese American artist), Hung Liu (Chinese American artist), and Yong Soon Min (Korean American artist). They, together with their counterparts, “discussed the clichéd images of Asian women in American popular culture, as opposed to their lived realities, and investigated the positions that gender, race, and ethnicity occupy in Asian American women’s self-definitions” (Farris xvi). The symposium is among one of the earliest post-1968 efforts to make women artists of color and their self-portraits more visible. It also directed public attention to the role Asian American women artists played in using self-representations to construct individual and collective identities.

Self-portraits are visual narratives of the body that convey social, historical, and cultural meanings. They are also defined as an “autobiography of the body” (Romero-Cesareo 913). As “part of the language painters use to make a point, from the simply this is what I look like to the more complicated this is what I believe in,” self-portraiture is traditionally dominated by men although there is also a long history of women’s self-portraits (Borzello 17). In the mid-1980s, however, some American women artists started to use self-portraits to address “sexuality, gender, age, ethnicity, religion, artistic identity, or cultural identity” (Sobel 9). Liu is among these artists to use gender as a political strategy in self-portraits. Her work is also unique because it has clear connections with history, politics, and immigration.

Hung Liu, like the other women artists and writers covered in this dissertation, is a Chinese immigrant artist positioned across historical and cultural boundaries. Therefore, this chapter similarly draws on the contexts of gender and ethnicity to examine her self-portraits and their roles in identity constructions. On the one hand, these

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portraits, together with works by many other women artists or women artists of color, demand scholarly consideration in the history of art. Given the fact that Chinese American women artists and their works have not received due scholarly or public attention, Liu’s self-portraits can serve as a springboard to start a conversation about Chinese immigrant women artists. On the other hand, these self-portraits specifically illustrate the complexity of Liu’s identity through representations of her own body, which is the sent-down body living overseas (yangchadui).

**Inserting Female Sent-Down Body in Self-Portraits: An Immigrant Discourse**

Among many Asian American women artists, Hung Liu, Yong Soon Min (Korean American artist), Flo Oy Wong (Chinese American artist), and Hanh Thi Pham (Vietnamese American photographic installation artist) have works with a strong focus on immigration. Wong and Pham are more interested in immigrants’ family experiences. Wong is more famous for her “Asian Rice Sack” series while Pham focuses on Vietnamese immigration. Liu and Min use their own bodies in self-portraits to “uncover the past buried by the winners of History and place the woman’s body in world history” (Kim 578). Liu, however, is the only Asian American artist who has a series of self-portraits to document and reconstruct her journeys from being a proletariat and sent-down youth to becoming a resident alien and U.S. citizen.

Liu lived thirty-six years of her life in China and went through some political

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86 They also use other artistic genres and forms in their works.
87 There are a few other established Chinese immigrant artists who survived the Cultural Revolution but their works do not stress their historical and immigration experiences. Li Huayi and Hai-ou Hou experiment with classical paintings or other forms of art.
movements in which both her family and herself were affected and victimized. A few months after her birth in 1948, her father was imprisoned for his service in the Nationalist army before the People’s Republic of China was founded. Her mother had to divorce him in order to protect Liu and herself. Liu’s father remained absent from her life for forty-six years until 1994, when they eventually met (this reunion inspired her to paint Father’s Day afterwards). During the Cultural Revolution, Liu herself had to give up her formal schooling and went to the countryside for re-education for four years (1968-1972). She toiled with farmers in the corn or rice field by day. In her spare time, she took photographs of them out of her own interest. Luckily, she was able to return to Beijing in 1972 and attend Beijing Teacher’s College to study art education. She not only managed to obtain a B.A. in art but also a graduate degree in mural painting from Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing afterwards. Many years of formal training in practicing socialist realism in art constrained Liu from exploring her artistic identity. She had to practice art under the Chinese Communist Party’s guidelines, painting posters of propaganda.

After the Cultural Revolution, Liu had an urge to study something completely different in the United States. She was admitted by an American university in California in 1981, but it took her much longer than she expected to leave China. At that time, China had just started to open up to the world again after many years of seclusion from anti-Communist countries. The Chinese government only selectively sponsored a small number of progressive students and scholars to study or do research overseas, hoping to get them back for economic and political reconstructions after they finished their programs. However, there were rigid policies about studying abroad under other forms
of sponsorship, which made it extremely difficult for those who intended to leave China to obtain passports. Under such circumstances, Liu was only able to leave for the U.S. in 1984, after a three-year delay.

One would think that Liu left behind a past on which she did not want to dwell much, because she was finally free from totalitarian restrictions to pursue her own artistic identity. On the contrary, she felt challenged to find her own voice and identity through artistic expressions. Jonathan Binstock, who wrote an encyclopedia entry on Liu, argues that the artist had to deal with “a crisis of cultural collision” (124). Moreover, she had to deal with a “doubly disadvantaged position of being a foreigner and a woman,” as Cheney et. al. suggest in Self-portraits by Women Artist (194).

Immigration has inevitably made Liu a Chinese immigrant positioned in two cultures. Consequently, she has to define her new identity within Chinese history and culture and Chinese immigrant history and culture as well. That is to say, as a newly immigrated artist, Liu has been able to distance herself from the recent past filled with harrowing experiences under totalitarian control. In the meantime, she has been able to examine and reflect on her new lived realities through an immigrant woman’s lens. In her feminist semiotic studies of Hung Liu’s art, Mary Wyrick writes that Liu “offers social critique of the act of altering, viewing, and reaffirming the individual as autonomous object” and tries to “expose how ethnicity, class, and gender are not fixed categories, but are reflections of majority ideologies” (80). The artist also ponders over the complexity of her identity. She says, “I feel more labeled than embraced as a minority artist. . . an artist of color, a woman artist (feminist?). . . . I am an artist from
China and in China the terms by which I am defined here make little sense. . . . I often feel suspended between the two cultures” (qtd. in Arief 35). Here Liu voices her frustrations and dilemmas as an immigrant who is not very familiar with identity labels imposed upon her by virtue of her racial and ethnic differences. Therefore, she has to constantly question, “What it means to be a Chinese American, or for that matter an American, without submitting to the possibility that either of these appellations could refer to just one thing” (Binstock 126).

In 1990, Liu applied to an American university for a faculty position but had to withdraw her application because she was concerned about the search chair’s racist attitude at their initial interview. She wrote the chair a letter that is now included in Feminist-Art-Theory edited by Hilary Robinson (2001). In the letter, she describes herself as:

- My legal term: Resident Alien.
- My professional term: Artist.
- My academic term: Assistant professor.
- My racial term: Asian (Chinese).
- My art world term: Woman of color (Yellow). (429)

Her nomenclatural act as such is her bitter response to the chair’s false assumptions that she was a “traditional Chinese artist with little or no sense of contemporary art” and therefore “unqualified to practice as a contemporary artist in America, or to teach American students” (Liu 429). In Liu’s point of view, the chair’s concern about her nationality implied that “being Chinese automatically meant that [she] was unqualified to practice as a contemporary artist in America, or to teach American students” (Liu 429) and it was racist by nature. Liu’s meeting the search chair was most likely her initial
experience of racism, and the letter was among her early critiques of racist attitudes toward new immigrants like herself.

For Liu, it was not only racism that she had to handle as a new immigrant. She also had to choose how to practice art as an immigrant artist. In 1990, she wrote a letter to university students, which is also included in *Feminist-Art-Theory*. In the letter she announces, “As a classically trained Chinese artist in the United States, my responsibility is not to assimilate, but to express my Chineseness as clearly as I can” (430). Nonetheless, Chineseness for Liu is not an essentialist notion of one collective identity. The Chineseness in her artworks comes from her endeavors to explore meanings of being a woman artist of color through representations of the Chinese female body in different historical and cultural contexts.

Liu’s letters clearly illuminate her resistance to racism and her determination to define her own identity -- a Chinese American positioned in both cultures. They also manifest her awareness of her subject position in the frame of race, ethnicity, gender, and immigration. She wants to be “a woman who combines Chinese background with recent American experiences” (Binstock 126). In so doing, she has been able “to create an iconography that transcends the boundaries of at least two cultures, providing important insights into both, as well as the fluid nature of cultural identification itself” (Binstock 126). It is also in this process of finding her own voice to define her own identity that she develops “a new sense of herself -- becoming a new person -- while retaining continuity with her old self” (Kuspit 7). As a result, she and her art provide a window for her

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88 This letter does not specify its readers.
audience to understand how people perceive their own and other cultures and how the fluid relations between the two can affect their rationalizations of self and difference. This postmodern notion of fluid identity challenges traditional conceptions of immigrants who were required to assimilate rather than keeping their cultures and traditions.\(^{89}\)

As an art student and later a professor of art in America, Liu and her art works inevitably reflected the aesthetics of art during the 1980s and onward. During the 1980s, there was a call for postmodern, poststructural, and feminist interventions in practicing and interpreting art. In *Criticizing Photographs* (2006), Terry Barrett states that visual arts in the 1980s started to “ask questions about meanings and texts of all sorts but provide a broader range of answers and resist any single answer” (161). In terms of feminist artwork, they either drew on photography to explore “female role-playing in culture” (164) or used images and words to investigate meanings of identity through various approaches, including “the use of narrative, autobiography, decoration, ritual, and craft-as-art” (164). Working within the postmodern and feminist tradition in the 1980s and onward, Liu weaved her training in socialist realism into her artistic exploration of Western art. In a lecture in Chicago in the late 1980s, she said, “I shifted my art work from socialist realism, the style in which I had been trained, to social realism” (*qtd.* in Jana 420). Such an announcement shows her deviation from her previous formal training in rigid and dogmatic practice in the name of revolution. It also shows her readiness to

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\(^{89}\) In the early twentieth century, the concept of “melting pot” was advertised in the name of assimilating immigrants into American culture. Towards the end of the twentieth century and with postmodern notion of identity construction, the rhetoric has changed into “mixed salad” to describe diverse components of American population. Cultural diversity has been embraced rather than rejected.

\(^{90}\) Terry Barrett is one of the leading American art scholars in art education. He is a professor at the Ohio State University and has authored three important books on how to interpret art.
accept Western aesthetics in art. Nevertheless, a further look at Socialist Realism and Social Realism unfolds certain connections between the two.

The basic premise of Socialist Realism is that art should reflect reality and help build socialism. David Shapiro, author of *Social Realism: Art as a Weapon* (1973), argues, “Social Realism predominantly selects as its subject matter the negative aspects of life under capitalism. Socialist Realism, as it is developed in the Soviet Union, supports the ruling class and the form of government. It selects the positive aspects of life under socialism” as its subject matter (28). In *Socialist Realist Painting* (1998), Matthew Bown defines Socialist Realism as, among other things, “realistic in form and socialist in content” (131). Looking back at art history, socialist realism sprang up in the Soviet Union after the October Revolution in 1917 and became full-fledged in the 1930s. Polish and Chinese artists followed suit by presenting socialist realist art works since both Poland and China were established by modeling themselves after the Soviet Union and sharing the same ideology. For Michael Sullivan, a sinologist, post-1949 Chinese art was subjected to the “Party apparatus and its Marxist-Maoist ideology” and was “to be viewed primarily as a reflection or expression of political forces” (712). Sullivan further notes that Socialist Realism became a “powerful propaganda tool” in China in the early 1950s (712) and many Chinese artists took classes with artists and scholars from the Soviet Union. After Mao passed away, however, it was used “to expose the horrors of the Cultural Revolution” (712). In the early 1980s, when Hung Liu left China, it was subverted and challenged by surrealist artists.

Social Realism, on the other hand, was the dominant art in America in the 1930s.
According to David Shapiro, it attempted to use art to expose the conditions of the working class and criticized capitalist exploitation. However, it never reached “its fruition” because it “never found its audience or, to be more accurate, its putative patrons” (28).

Although Liu declared her change from socialist realism to social realism in practicing art, her works, especially her self-portraits, are still realist in nature. The question for Liu is, how can Social Realism work for her when it did not succeed in America? The truth, however, is that she has succeeded with her social realist representations of being a Chinese American. This will be further discussed in the rest of the chapter.

In practice, Liu also uses various subject matter, materials, and techniques to represent the hybrid aspect of her art and her Chineseness in particular. In Kim’s words, Liu uses cultural collage, combining American pop imagery, Western classical oil painting styles, minimalism’s flat planes of color, expressionism’s drip techniques, Asian brush-painting aesthetics, old Chinese iconography, maps, scientific drawings, acupuncture charts, ceramics, calligraphy, and modern Chinese political poster references. (593)

What Kim implies is that Liu juxtaposes different styles or techniques of painting and draws heavily on her heritage as well. Like many Asian American women artists, as Jana et. al. observe in Women Artists of Color (1999), she utilizes thematic and technical means to represent her Chinese roots and “the Western influences that have shaped” her aesthetic and personal visions (374). As a result, Liu’s artworks are hybrid by nature in the same way that her identity is cross-cultural. In Kim’s words, she has made herself “a
cross-cultural, hybrid artist” (593) after she embarked on a strenuous journey to explore her artistic and immigrant identities.

Contemporary artists of self-portraits use a variety of techniques. Some artists, such as Janine Antoni (1964-), subvert traditional emphasis on heroism, naturalness, or expressionism. Other artists like Ashley Bickerton (1959-), Ross Bleckner (1949- ) or Jonathan Borofsky (1942- ) use “abstract or conceptual surrogates for their own likeness” in a postmodern tradition (Sobel 8). For them, “realism and traditional representation fall short in expressing” what they think of themselves and “how they conform to contemporary culture” (Sobel 12).

Whatever techniques artists at the end of the twentieth century have chosen to use, they all seem to engage with ideas of the self and try to answer the question “Who Am I?” In addition, they also explore meanings of fitting into “contemporary society” (Sobel 9). In a word, at the center of their self-portraits is the issue of identity, which is expressed through sexuality, gender, age, ethnicity, or cultural identity.

As an artist of Chinese heritage, Liu, while exploring meanings of identity, is also concerned about “concepts of self and nationhood, her own female body and its place in global politics” by often “[placing] her own image in her work” (Kim 593-595). This observation from Kim points to the fact that Liu draws on the female body to explore meanings of being a Chinese American or an American by using body images. In both her earlier and recent works, she uses her own body as a site of identity construction. She produced a series of self-portraits between 1988 and 2006.
In these portraits, Liu represents historical and cultural experiences inscribed upon her sent-down body in two contexts. They create an oppressive discourse of race and gender in America while also showing that Liu enjoys the freedom she did not have in China. Through these self-portraits, Liu is able to find alternate ways of naming herself in a culture unable to comprehend the complexity of her identity. Henceforth, her self-portraits become critical sites in which she demonstrates her efforts to define her immigrant identity whose Chinese background is undeniably part of it.

In 1988, four years after moving to the United States as one of the “student immigrants” from mainland China, Liu displayed her first self-portrait Resident Alien. It demonstrates the artist’s reflections on marginality, racism, and sexism. The portrait is constructed around a U.S. Department of Justice Immigration and Naturalization Service card (green card) issued to the immigrant, who is renamed as Fortune Cookie (alias Hung Liu). In 1993, she painted another self-portrait, A Third World. It continues with the artist’s efforts to consider marginality, but she starts to position herself across history and culture. Her own body now embodies a recent past in China and Chinese immigration in the 19th-century California: Hung Liu wears a red scarf with a badge of the Communist Party leader Mao Zedong pinned to it. She also has a gold map of the 19th century San Francisco on her forehead. In 2006, she presented three more self-portraits titled respectively as Proletarian (wuchanzhe 無產者), Immigrant (yimin 移民), and Citizen (gongmin 公民). These self-portraits covering a span of eighteen years address issues of

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91 Many Chinese immigrants initially enter the United States holding student visas (F-1), temporary stay for the purpose of study. They stay to work after graduation on working visas (H-1) and then obtain permanent residency before naturalization. The whole process -- from being a student immigrant to becoming a U.S. citizen -- is usually as long as about ten to fifteen years.
immigrant identities and reveal the artist’s efforts to explore her personal identity, which is inextricably linked to historical and cultural specificity.

**Integrative Methods of Interpreting Liu’s Self-Portraits**

Barrett explains in *Interpreting Art* (2003) that “any work of art or artifact will attract different interpretations from different viewers” because it “generates many meanings and “may not generate the meanings intended by the artists who made the works being interpreted” (xv-xviii). He further notes, “Works of art provide knowledge and experiences only if the works of art are interpreted; not to interpret them is to miss them” (xvi). Here Barrett is sharp in identifying problems of interpretations as viewers all inevitably carry their own cultural baggage when interpreting art. It is, therefore, not surprising to detect discrepancies between artists’ intentions and viewers’ expectations and interpretations. Nevertheless, this does not mean that differing interpretations are always problematic because they help communicate meanings and produce knowledge.

One thing interpreters should bear in mind is that artists always interact with their societies. In order to avoid ungrounded subjective interpretations of works of art, so to speak, viewers should locate contexts in which a painter works. Cheney *et al.* (2000) claim that “there is always a danger of reading one’s own ideas into a painting rather than discovering what the artist sought to communicate. If the painting alludes to some known event in her life, one has the basis for analysis rather than mere subjective interpretation” (xviii). Here Cheney and her colleagues reiterate the significance of contexts as the basis for analysis. While I agree with them on stressing contexts, I also
think that interpretations of art should examine how art represents these contexts or how they inform and shape art, and my approach in this chapter is the latter.

In *Visual Methodologies* (2001), Gillian Rose details one possible analytical method of visual art: content analysis. She proposes that the purpose of content analysis is to “interpret written and spoken texts” (54). It is methodologically explicit in reading art and visual images as it is about analyzing, among other things, cultural texts that are coded by categories identified through different sites in a piece of art or visual image. Rose lists some criteria for doing content analysis: finding images, devising categories for coding, coding images, and analyzing the results. This method allows for designing “coding categories” when examining a body of images and the broader “cultural context” (60). It can connect text, context, and code around, for instance, power, race, and history. To use Rose’s words, it is also a “technique the results of which need interpreting through an understanding of how the codes in an image connect to the wider context within which that image makes sense” (65). In *Interpreting Art* (2003), Barrett provides nineteen principles for interpreting art. Some of them are useful to analyze Liu’s self-portraits. They are: 1) “Artworks are always about something,” 2) “Subject matter + Medium + Form + Context = Meaning;” and 3) All art is in part about the world in which it emerged.”(198). For Barrett, since all art has these elements, interpreting art involves an examination of subject matter, medium, form, and context so as to generate meaning.

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92 For detailed descriptions of subject matter, medium, and context, refer to the last chapter in Terry Barrett’s *Interpreting Art*. In Barrett’s words, subject matter refers to “the recognizable stuff in a work of art: persons, places, things, and so forth,” medium “is the material out of which an artwork is made,” form refers to “compositional decisions the artist has made in making and presenting a work of art.” (Barrett 2003:200). This includes line, texture, and color. Context by definition is “the artwork’s casual
Feminist art historian Jacqueline Chanda (2004) suggests using “the period eye” to interpret art. By “the period eye,” she means that interpreters should analyze “what the objects symbolize in the culture, through correlation with written documents that explains them” (88). It suggests that content and meanings in art are usually “context-bound and period specific and not always overtly understood by others” (88). What Chanda implies here is the necessity to situate art in contexts in order to locate the basis for analysis, as Cheney *et al.* have discussed similarly.

The approaches of Barrett, Rose, and Chanda inform the following analysis of Liu’s self-portraits with a focus on the relationship between content and context as reflected in artworks.

The other analytical frame that contributes to interpreting Liu’s self-portraits is what Jana Evans Braziel calls “diasporic consciousness.” As a Chinese immigrant woman artist, Liu has experiences and insights that inform her perceptions of herself as an artist and a transnational artist. She acknowledges that crossing borders “has fundamentally changed [her] perceptions” and she “no longer [considers herself] a ‘pure’ Chinese” because she is “a Chinese in the process of becoming an American.” She also recognizes that she has become American “without knowing it” (*qtd.* in Kelly 611). She says that her art “is already a hybrid” (*qtd.* in Kelley 612). The hybrid nature of Liu’s art invites a transnational lens to interpret how she makes cultural and emotional transition through art and experiences her “own personal and cultural memory” to make something larger than herself (*qtd.* in Kelly 617). This transnational lens could draw on “diasporic environment, that is, what was historically present to the artist at the time the artwork was made.” (Barrett 2003: 200)
consciousness” to interpret Liu’s efforts to reconsider meanings of assimilation while recognizing the “positive virtues” of being an immigrant (25).

“Diasporic consciousness,” proposed by Braziel in *Diaspora: An Introduction* (2008) is “predicated on a strong tie to the past or a block to assimilation in the present and future.” It “involves recognition of the positive virtues of retaining a diasporic identity, as well as a tension between an ethnic, a national and a transnational identity” (25). Liu’s diasporic consciousness has found expressions in many of her recent works of art. She writes in her statement published by Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, “I am exploring the questions of personal and national identity as they drift across the concepts and experiences of ‘homeland’ and ‘new home.’” Liu’s statement confirms that her works invite a transnational lens for interpretation.

**Interpreting Liu’s Self-Portraits: The Sent-Down Body in Multiple Locations**

Liu’s personal history documents her participation in all the major political movements in China between 1949 and the early 1980s, voluntarily or involuntarily. During the Cultural Revolution, she and her family were forced to purge their ideologies or behaviors that seemed to be in opposition to communist idealism that Mao and the Communist Party propagandized. One of the moves Hung Liu had to take, together with millions of peers during the Cultural Revolution, was to go to the countryside for re-education. She left for a farm to work in “rice, corn, and wheat fields” and “take care of the horses as a means of ridding her of elitist thought” (Arieff 35). In the countryside,

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she also had to study in educational programs to eradicate “politically unpopular ideas” (Arieff 35). In various interviews or publications, Liu has commented very little on her life in the countryside -- years of toiling in the field and taking reeducation classes. Nonetheless, she looked at the period of the Cultural Revolution through critical and historical lenses in installations such as Where Is Mao (1988) and Trauma (1990). Her self-portraits are among the very few artworks in which she shows herself as a bearer and witness of the Cultural Revolution.

Resident Alien, Hung Liu’s first self-portrait, invites her audience to examine how her body is positioned and portrayed in relation to legal, racial, and gender issues based on immigration. In this portrait, her body projected on the green card is not only an immigrant body but also a sexualized and racialized body. It uses a mug shot of the artist to “re-appropriate [Hung Liu’s] own identification card photo” (Arieff 36). It was originally an off-site installation of the Capp Street Project in San Francisco, California. Later on, it was exhibited in a few museums and included in a few books. The portrait addresses issues of marginality, racism, and sexism. It portrays a Chinese American woman whose identity is rewritten because of immigration. It is a visual illustration of the haunting ambiguity Hung Liu feels shortly after she becomes an immigrant from Communist China. It reveals her emotions of standing between two cultures. It clearly provides a visual critique of prescribed racial and gender identity of her immigration status under the rubric of American immigration law. Designated as a “resident alien,” as is the case with most “fresh-off-the-boat” Chinese immigrant women in the 1980s and onward, Liu is legally defined as “resident” but Other -- an oppositional nomenclature.
The subject matter and form the artist selects and uses apparently portrays her feelings of being marginalized. The subject matter in the portrait involves Liu’s dated green card, a new name, “Fortune Cookie,” changed date of birth, her resident alien number, fingerprint, the American eagle, and the artist’s signature in Chinese. As for form (compositional decisions an artist makes to organize formal elements or space), the symbol of the American eagle is at the dominant center while the artist’s photo is pushed to the lower left corner of the portrait. Immigration status -- Resident Alien -- is in bold and capitalized letters on the very top of the portrait, followed by the department that issues her immigration status (U.S. Department of Justice-Immigration and Naturalization Bureau).

Form in this portrait reflects multiple layers of oppression and marginality under state control and manipulation in the context of race and immigration. The way Liu positions her body in this portrait reflects her lack of power and voice. As a new immigrant and an alien, Liu was under the U.S. legal censorship and had no rights to define her own identity. Four things are highlighted in the portrait: the status of resident alien, the new name, the American eagle, and her fingerprint. They convey a message that new immigrants like Liu have no power to name themselves and, as soon as they entered the United States, they are subject to institutionalized and systemic discriminations depending on their racial affiliations. As powerless aliens, they have to live with their new realities in the United States.

*Resident Alien* also illustrates oppression and marginalization. Liu represents her body in relation to her legal status as a resident alien, the new name, the American eagle,
and fingerprint. In this portrait, Hung Liu’s body is framed within the category of resident alien, which is on the center top of her green card. It determines how she is defined in the U.S. context. For instance, under this category, Liu receives her new name, “Fortune Cookie.” The name appears above her head and symbolizes oppression because it not only eliminates her individual identity identifying her with an ethnic group but also bears specific discrimination against Chinese Americans and Chinese American women. The American eagle is the official stamp on her new birthday, leaving her little room to negotiate for correction. It also almost covers one side of Liu’s face and looks bigger than Liu’s head while stationed very close to her body. Liu’s body apparently has little power while facing the American eagle, the symbol of U.S. power. The American eagle separates her fingerprint from her body. The fingerprint, in this sense, is officially displaced and put under another form of censorship -- for background or security check. Unlike U.S. citizens, whose fingerprints do not visibly appear anywhere on their IDs, resident aliens’ fingerprints must appear on the green card and therefore turn the ownership of them to the U.S. government. The fingerprints also make it easy for U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services to keep track of resident aliens. In sum, the compositional decisions Liu makes to organize the formal elements and space in *Resident Alien* shows how she is marginalized and defined as an immigrant.

In *Resident Alien*, Liu also relates her body to various cultural and historical contexts and meanings. For instance, her birth date 1948 is replaced by 1984, when she entered the United States. With this replacement, her past is completely erased and her

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94 After the terrorist attack in 2001, DHS has required green card holders to be fingerprinted and photographed whenever they enter the United States after a trip overseas.
first thirty-six years become meaningless and unimportant. As a resident alien in America, she is defined by who she presently is instead of who she was. On another note, the replacement is also ambiguous as the viewer could interpret that Hung Liu deliberately erases a traumatic past under totalitarian control that she does not want to dwell on when she has started her life anew on this side of the Pacific Ocean. Interestingly, her move to the United States happened in 1984, a time of degradation under totalitarian control as described in George Orwell’s dystopian novel *1984* (1949). The coincidence could allude to some interrelations between totalitarian control under communism and cultural imperialism under capitalism. Therefore, Liu entered a different regime of power and control by fleeing the other. At any rate, in this portrait she portrays a new immigrant whose past and history become irrelevant. It also shows how her past and present are similarly repressive.

Another example is that Liu positions her body in relation to the U.S. consumer economy that identifies ethnic groups with certain names, which in turn assume derogatory or discriminatory meanings. Liu’s new name, “Fortune Cookie,” is an example. In *Reading Chinese Fortune Cookie: The Making of Chinese American Rhetoric* (2006), Mao Luming claims that “the Chinese fortune cookie, to all intents and purposes, has become a natural part of eating a Chinese meal in America” (147). His statement conveys the truth that Americans consume the Chinese fortune cookie as part of their experiences of consuming Chinese culture. Few of them, however, are aware of the racist and sexist undertones embedded in the cookie.
The fortune cookie is a stereotype mainstream Americans use to categorize Chinese Americans while, ironically, it is not inherently Chinese at all. The fortune cookie was not initially from China. Like General Tsao’s Chicken or Chop Suey prepared popularly in Chinese restaurants in the U.S., it was an American invention by Chinese immigrants in the 1920s and was nowhere to be seen in China until the early 1990s. Although “it doesn’t really contain fortunes and it isn’t even really Chinese,” it has become a cultural icon encompassing Chinese Americans and consumed as part of Chinese culture as well (Kim 593).

Liu names herself Fortune Cookie in *Resident Alien* and is no longer defined as who she deems herself to be but in reference to her affiliation with one racial or ethnic group. With the new name, she loses her original identity and part of her personal history. In the new context of immigration, she has to re-examine herself in Chinese immigration history, with which she had no historical connections before 1984. In sum, she contains the meanings of the fortune cookie and is also contained in it.

The fortune cookie is also paradoxical in its implications. While it means to bring good luck to those who open it, life for Chinese immigrants has not been easy and it has been replete with uncertainties. Many early Chinese immigrants arrived in America in the middle of the 19th century as forty-niners to mine gold or as *kuli* (laborers) to build transcontinental railroads. Irrespective of all the hardships and discriminations, they endured or uncertainties their future held, they were full of hope for a better life for

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95 Food historians agree that the Fortune Cookie is an American invention. For more information, refer to http://www.foodtimeline.org/foodasian.html#fortunecookies or history channel at history.com.
themselves and their families. Liu followed the footsteps of her immigrant ancestors to search for her fortune and became one of the twentieth-century Chinese American “gold miners.”

The fortune cookie is also a hybrid, according to Liu and Mao. In her essay on Liu, Allison Arief quotes the artist, who views the fortune cookie as an apt symbol of her status and says, “it is a hybrid -- it exists between cultures . . . it’s not Chinese and it’s not American” (36). Mao’s study of the Chinese fortune cookie confirms Liu’s stance. Mao also considers the fortune cookie a hybrid, which is “born of two very different traditions” and “is in fact infused with conflicts, contestations, and ambiguities” (Mao 3). The interpretation along the line of hybridity does not contradict earlier discussions of race implicated in the fortune cookie, as we can argue that race can be also constructed in hybridity and it is further complicated by the presence of cultural crossings.

In Resident Alien, Liu also questions sexism embedded in the name of “Fortune Cookie.” In Self-portraits by Women Artists, Cheney et. al. briefly mention that the fortune cookie is “a slang term for a Chinese woman” (194). On September 27, 2001, The Daily Targum (official student newspaper of Rutgers University in New Brunswick) makes a similar observation in an introduction to Liu’s Resident Alien. It says, “Liu includes humor in this piece, as the name Fortune Cookie -- a sexual slang for Chinese women -- is placed above her portrait instead of her name.” Whether or not there is humor in the term “fortune cookie,” the writer of the essay on Liu acknowledges the sexist tone of the phrase like Cheney and her colleagues. Therefore, as the fortune cookie shows, Hung Liu’s identity is also colonized under the new rubric of racism intertwined
with sexism and, therefore, race and gender together further complicate her identity as a Chinese American woman.

There is a long history of Chinese women (East Asian women in general) being considered more sexually desirable because of their physical features and personalities. For Chinese immigrant women, their history of being exotic and then objectified started when American merchants brought a Chinese woman with bound feet to America for display in the nineteenth century. In the first major book covering women’s experiences in the United States published in 1998, Sucheta Mazumdar, one of the contributors, says:

The first recorded Asian woman in the United States was Afong Moy. Between 1834 and 1847, she sat every day surrounded with Chinese lanterns, vases, and Asian artifacts at the American Museum, the Brooklyn Institute, and other New York locations. She talked and counted in Chinese and ate with chopsticks to entertain the thousands who lined up to see her. Barnum’s Chinese Museum later brought over Miss Pwan-ye-koo and her maidservant with great fanfare. The small, bound feet of both women were a prime attraction. This objectification of Asian women and their portrayal as alien and exotic creatures is one dimension of American popular culture that has endured until the contemporary period. (46-47)

Here Mazumdar points to the fact that Chinese women were objectified and commodified in the nineteenth-century America, where women from other racial groups had similar experiences at the time (African American women were portrayed as jezebels, for instance). In *Chinese Women of America: A Pictorial History* (1986), Judy Yung also discusses Chinese women in America and how stereotypes were established with their arrival. After Afong Moy, according to Yung, a few other Chinese women appeared in

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96 This display of Chinese women and their bound feet runs parallel with objectification of African women in the early 19th century, when Saartjie Baartman from South Africa was studied and displayed in European museums.
American Museums for exhibition. Yung asserts that “Novelty was the attraction, and everything these women did was perceived as unusual, peculiar or exotic” and the shows “gave rise to the earliest stereotype of Chinese women as exotic curios” (14).

In the mid-nineteenth century, Chinese women were further sexualized. They were described as sexually accessible and available to provide sexual services. Kim asserts in her 1996 journal article on Liu that “most of the nineteenth-century Chinese women in America had been lured, sold, or kidnapped into prostitution to meet the demand for sexual services in the predominantly male West Coast culture” (576). Historian Iris Chang provides more historical contexts for Chinese women’s sexual services in *The Chinese America* (2003). She states, “women were scarce in San Francisco. Most prospectors were single, or chose not to bring their wives and children to this raw frontier. With these demographics, brothels inevitably flourished. Some enterprising women in San Francisco charged more than a hundred dollars a night” (35). For Kim and Chang, early Chinese immigrant women in San Francisco became sexual objects to serve Chinese bachelors or married men whose wives were not around. Chang also points out that many Chinese prostitutes were imported to America against their will and some were attracted by stories “of the incredible wealth and leisure to be enjoyed in the United States” (82). On arrival, they were forced to serve Chinese men and also became targets of “white miners, who called them ‘Chiney ladies,’ ‘moon-eyed pinch feet,’ and ‘she-heathens’” (Chang 84), terms with racist and sexist overtones.

Films in the early twentieth century also depicted Chinese women as sexual objects. For instance, Arthur Sarsfield Ward introduced Fu Manchu, an evil-like Chinese
male character, in “a series of pulp fiction thrillers,” which also portrayed Chinese women “either as victims, fragile China dolls, compliant and sexually available to white men, or villainesses, dragon ladies, cunning and dangerous seductresses.” Anna May Wong became the first Chinese American woman actress to perform these characters (Chang 207-208). Now like many other sexual slang terms for (ethnic) women in America (White-meat, Chocolate-drop, hot-chocolate, frog-legs), the fortune cookie has assumed sexist meanings particularly designated to Chinese American women. In many informal conversations, it is not surprising to hear men say, “Look at that little fortune cookie.” With her own immigration, Hung Liu managed to escape gender neutrality imposed by the Chinese totalitarian state control but was subsumed by American sexual politics that is complicated by race and gender and became objectified.

In Resident Alien, Liu also uses the subject matter of the fingerprint and signature in Chinese characters to produce cultural meanings. Both can be interpreted as a kind of signature but the difference lies in one indicating objectification and the other asserting the artist’s Chineseness. If a fingerprint symbolizes a unique signature only recognized through government-monitored machines and subjected to censorship, Liu’s signature in Chinese (刘虹, meaning rainbow) grants her agency and power to define herself -- how she likes to be addressed, defined, and identified. In so doing, she rejects to give herself an English name as a sign of assimilation, which is a common practice among many Chinese immigrants. In East-West Montage: Reflections on Asian Bodies in Diaspora (2007), Shengmei Ma argues that many Asian immigrants “have nominally abandoned their names/selves in favor of the Anglicized renditions/shadows” in order to “claim
Liu, however, resists this act of “linguistically and culturally self-disowning” (189) as she announced in her letter to university students that she would express her Chineseness clearly whenever possible.

Liu not only inserts her own signature written in Chinese but also presents her entire body to the viewer in another version of *Resident Alien* (a photograph taken of her sitting in front of the installation of *Resident Alien* in 1988). The version is included as plate 65 in Ella Shohat’s *Talking Visions* (1998) and is closely examined by art historian Thalia Gouma-Peterson. She describes how the photo shows the artist in tennis shoes:

> with hands firmly clasped over her crossed legs. . . . The grey jumpsuit she wears, which resembles army fatigues, alludes to the militarism of the Cultural Revolution that so profoundly affected her life as a young adult. In this suit, which she calls her ‘working clothes,’ she feels both comfortable and empowered. ‘It has a military, proletarian, and working class feeling and is even rather macho.’ (9)

Apparently, in this version of *Resident Alien*, Liu looks very assertive and confident. Positioned in the complexity of history—American immigration history and contemporary Chinese history, she deliberately subverts the subject/West and object/East gaze and turns herself into the subject of vision by returning the gaze to the viewer.

After *Resident Alien*, Liu continued to use representations of her own body to explore meanings of being a Chinese American by fusing history, culture, and immigration experiences together. In the four portraits she produced between 1993 and 2006, she deviates from representations of sexualized Chinese female sent-down body by demonstrating her own construction and interpretation of immigration as cross-historical and cross-cultural racial experiences. *A Third World* (1993) is created in the trajectory of
*Resident Alien* and demonstrates even more deeply the complexity of Liu’s racial and gender identity that crosses cultures and historical moments. This self-portrait further portrays the hybrid nature of Liu’s identity -- I am here and there at the same time -- and disrupts the fixity in identity construction.

The subject matter in *A Third World* is not as complicated as that in *Resident Alien*. It has the artist’s face, a red scarf, a medallion of Mao Zedong, and an old gold map of San Francisco on the artist’s forehead. Unlike *Resident Alien*, *A Third World* moves the artist’s body to the center of the portrait, a gesture of moving from the margin to the center to practice self-reflection.

This portrait shows the artist constructing her identity in relation to histories of contemporary China under Mao and Chinese American immigration. Liu’s identity is contained in two historical moments and ideologies. It also ties the individual past informed and shaped by the communist ideology into Liu’s immigrant identity. In other words, history plays a significant role but in a different dimension. Liu’s body is presented as a carrier of the American Dream and as living evidence of the recent traumatic past and she is not a whole person without both.97

In this portrait, Liu uses symbols and colors for her viewers to examine her identity with two cultural and historical settings in mind: a Mao medallion and a map; colors of red and yellow. The Mao medallion pinned to Hung Liu’s scarf is emblematic of communist ideology imposed upon Hung Liu during her coming-of-age years. It also represents a history Hung Liu left behind, which, however, has become indispensable to

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216
how she is defined. Mao the official God-man of Red China who passed away in 1976 still holds on to her with his communist idealism and ideological purity. However, instead of pinning the medallion on the left part of the chest and keeping it close to the heart as Chinese people did during the Cultural Revolution to show loyalty, it is displaced in the portrait. While Red China is what defines Liu and her past, she is detached from it not only with her immigration but also with her critical reflections.

Liu inscribes cultural and historical meanings on her face in this portrait as well. A map of San Francisco appears on her forehead, suggesting her vision of Chinese immigrants’ lives in America. The map shows how she has followed the footsteps of her Chinese American ancestors in order to pursue the American Dream. Kuspit suggests that the map on Hung Liu’s forehead is based “on the first map of San Francisco (1839) rather than on its contemporary dimensions, suggesting Liu’s displacement of her re-origination as an American onto the city” (6) and serves to represent her new identity. Liu has to revisit meanings of the American Dream for Chinese immigrants while pursuing her own dreams for freedom and a better life. This means, while there is a geohistorical displacement in her identity construction, she participates in the Gold Rush symbolically and metaphorically. The Santa Barbara Museum of Art exhibits A Third World under the theme of “Identities” from November 3, 2007 to September 14, 2008. According to the museum, A Third World “addresses the conflict between two radically different ideologies -- capitalism and communism. Clashing worldviews dramatize the profound ramifications of relocation on personal and cultural identity.” For the

98 Liu confirms Kuspit’s analysis in her blog entry.
exhibition organizers, the map is “the gold-leaf third eye, which symbolizes the inner world in Eastern thought . . . and is used to suggest San Francisco’s status as a main destination for Chinese immigrants.” The portrait clearly shows how the two ideologies have switched places after Liu became an immigrant. They are, however, culturally and historically connected and indispensable to Liu’s identity constructions. The museum organizers are right in suggesting that the portrait shows two conflicting ideologies but they fail to observe that the two ideologies do not exclude each other.

Liu could not have become who she is without both ideologies. Liu writes, “I grew up singing The Internationale [and] truly believed in Communism, in a socialist utopian dream, and in heroism. I have since replaced those beliefs with a kind of modern humanism, but some fundamental values and ideology from my thirty-six years in China stay with me.” She also states that her Chinese past and her American identity “could co-exist but the tension, the collision would always be there” (qtd. in Binstock 126). Although Communism and Capitalism entail two conflicting ideologies, Liu does not completely deny one in favor of the other. Rather, she mediates between the two when she explores meanings of being a Chinese American woman.

Colors of red and yellow used in A Third World also bear symbolic meanings in Liu’s exploration of her identity in America. Red, like the Mao medallion, is closely linked to the Communist ideology promulgated in China. Historically, the color was associated with communism and symbolized the Red Scare in the 1950s in the capitalist world. Before or during China’s Cultural Revolution, the color itself moved beyond the

99 Refer to http://kelliu.com Hung Liu’s personal website.
color spectrum and symbolized revolution, martyrdom, loyalty, and determination to carry on the communist cause. It was and still is the dominant color on China’s national flag. It also served as the book cover for every single Little Red Book by Mao. It decorated every medallion of Mao. Young Pioneers, progressive primary school students, wore a Red Scarf (honglingjin 红领巾) around the neck. Red Guards, revolutionary teenagers, wore red armbands (hongxiuzhang 红袖章). Liu and her generation grew up surrounded by the color red, and she will always be associated with Red China, a name synonymous with the Communist China. Nonetheless, she is able to be physically detached from her recent past, because these associations are displaced and symbolically pinned to a scarf. What is on Liu’s mind is the American Dream in the image of the Gold Mountain. Liu paints the map of San Francisco (1839) on her forehead yellow, the color of gold and a fetishistic and materialized icon. Gold symbolizes wealth, hope, fortune, and opportunities, while at the same time implies many untold harrowing experiences of Chinese immigrants.

Jacquelyn Serwer (1996) examines Liu’s works of art and suggests that “no matter how painful, she wants to “turn the negative into something positive…to put it out there, to share with other people” (16). It is true that the past Liu possessed when she was in China and the past she inherited from Chinese immigrant ancestors are replete with her mixed feelings and complicated memories, but the reality she is faced with as an immigrant in contemporary America is anything but more promising. If Resident Alien shows more of her reflections on marginality, racism, and sexism, A Third World picks up the thread of being marginalized (as the title indicates) and witnesses how she paints
her identity through her ties to history and culture. Binstock (1996) insightfully points out:

just being herself, a woman who combines a Chinese background with recent American experiences, has enabled her to create an iconography that transcends the boundaries of at least two cultures, providing important insights into both, as well as the fluid nature of cultural identification itself. (126)

This is exactly what Liu has been trying to do. Alongside her other art practices (she uses historical photographs to recreate history through images of Chinese women), she continued to explore deep meanings of being a Chinese American through self-portraits. Two decades after she exhibited *Resident Alien* and thirteen years after she displayed *A Third World*, she painted a series of self-portraits in 2006.100

These recent self-portraits by Liu recapture and further explore meanings of being a Chinese American, a question that she has endeavored to answer in her various works of art. With Shark’s Ink she displayed three self-portraits titled respectively as *Proletarian* (*wuchanzhe* 無產者), *Immigrant* (*yimin* 移民), and *Citizen* (*gongming* 公民), “each denoting an important period of her life” (Shark’s Ink)101. Shark’s Ink, the only carrier of Liu’s most recent self-portraits, provides a detailed introduction by saying:

“Proletarian” shows a young Hung Liu at the time of the Cultural Revolution, working in the countryside. “Immigrant” is based on a photograph taken at the time of her immigration to the US. “Citizen” is a recent self-portrait as a confident and mature woman of the world. She embellishes the images with lovely drawings of plants, flowers, birds, rats (her Chinese zodiac sign) and painterly drips and circles. Collaged on each print are representations of the ID cards, permits, and ration coupons that

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100 These portraits can be found at Shark’s Ink (http://www.sharksink.com/), a well-known contemporary American print publisher. Liu has about nine prints for sale with the publisher, including her new self-portraits.

101 Shark’s Ink is a publisher of contemporary prints. It has released many of Liu’s artwork. For more information on Liu and other artists, refer to < http://www.sharksink.com/>. 
have documented her “official” status associated with these portraits. (retrieved Jan. 12, 2008)

These self-portraits are slightly different from *Resident Alien* and *A Third World*, as Liu incorporates more cultural and historical elements. This enables her viewers to explore deeper meanings of her being a Chinese American.

Liu’s 2006 self-portraits also invite further examinations through “the period eye,” an approach suggested by Chanda because they are, together with many of Liu’s other works, a cultural critique, which is very period specific. It puts Liu in historical continuity and cultural relevance. *Resident Alien* and *A Third World* essentially represent Liu’s explorations of what it means to be an immigrant during initial or early contact with America. Her recent self-portraits, however, incorporate more artifacts -- naming, symbols, and official documents -- by re-historicizing and recreating her journey into a self between two cultures. As a result, they enable the viewer to perceive and examine the artist in major historical changes and cultural exchange.

Liu announces in her artist’s statement posted on the Art Scene Warehouse website:

> I also introduce traditional Chinese painting motifs into the photo-based field, hoping to enliven and stir up its surface. These include images of birds, flowers, stamps, and landscapes, among others, all borrowed from Chinese art history and suspended in the paintings. The traditional motifs evoke a sense of the cultural memory underlying the surfaces of history. In particular, the stylized Chinese birds - some from paintings as old as one thousand years seem like witnesses from China’s past, overlooking and commenting upon events from its modern era. Thus, two layers of historical representation -- from traditional painting and modern

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photography -- co-exist in my paintings. (retrieved 1/30/2008)

Obviously, Liu’s statement suggests a slight shift of her painting techniques and styles from her earlier works such as *Resident Alien* and *A Third World*. Beginning from the mid-1990s, she started to paint more from historical photographs and to paint portraits of Chinese women in different historical and cultural settings. She continued with her interest in the Chinese female body to create cultural meanings. At the same time, she started to use gender-and culture-related Chinese art motifs to further examine her own identity. The three self-portraits to be examined demonstrate her efforts to position her body in relation to Chinese cultural history, her personal history, and American immigration history as well. For instance, in her new self-portraits, Liu uses plants, crops, animals, calligraphy, bright colors, and replicate of her old ID cards. Her subject matter undoubtedly helps convey the artist’s efforts to define her identity in history and culture.

Plants often appear in Chinese paintings and carry symbolic meanings. In his studies of symbolism in Chinese paintings, Liu Yang (200) points out:

> Flowers and birds are ubiquitous motifs in Chinese art. The endurance and resonance of these motifs arise not only from their natural beauty, but also their cultural associations. Often they are suffused with poetic and overtones or imbued with social and political allusions. (12)

As addressed earlier in this chapter, Hung Liu adopts Western painting styles and techniques while using Chinese motifs. The three self-portraits in 2006 illustrate more clearly how she follows the Chinese tradition of using plants in her self-portraits to
portray her identity in relation to history and culture. She, however, does not use plants randomly, as Yang argues that plants suggest overtones and allusions.

In *Proletarian* Liu uses the lotus to explore cultural and gender meanings embedded in the flower. In Chinese culture and art, the lotus symbolizes purity, perfection, and immortality. Deeply rooted in Buddhist ideology and circulated in Buddhist mythology, the lotus is usually believed to come out of mires and mud but remains clean and untarnished. According to Yang whose study of symbolism in Chinese painting is very informative and educational, “to Buddhists, the lotus flower blooms above the water just as Buddha is born into the world but lives above the world” and is known “as the sacred flower of Buddhism” (Yang 16). The lotus is also esteemed by the Taoist, who believes that it represents one of the eight immortals of Taoism. Many Chinese poets and artists praise or use the image of the lotus in their works as evidence to reject reconciliation with corrupted social forces or society in general. By using lotus, Liu convey a message that she refused to participate in prosecuting and victimizing so-called “counterrevolutionaries” or purging all that has to do with Western ideologies.

In addition to purity, perfection, and immortality, the lotus is also associated with the sexual appeal of Chinese women. Back in the Southern Qi Dynasty (499-501), the lotus was made of “gold-leaf strewn upon the ground for” (Yang 16) Lord Donghun’s concubine to dance upon. Beginning approximately from the 13th century when foot binding started, women’s small feet assumed erotic meanings and were called the “three-inch lotus” for a few centuries. In the meantime, the lotus also alludes to fertility because

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the lotus pod contains many seeds like a melon, promising many children in succession. If examined in relation to Chinese history and culture, the lotus (flowers and pods) here points to Liu’s identity as a contemporary Chinese woman who also falls into traditional Chinese expectations of women.

In *Immigrant* Liu uses corn in the background to recreate her personal history as a re-educated youth working in the corn or rice field during the Cultural Revolution. While golden corn often represents harvest, it is reflective of Liu’s four-year toil in the corn field in order to be reeducated. It is undeniably part of her historical experiences that shaped her adolescence and helped make who she is today. Nonetheless, Liu does not project these experiences in the way she highlights her status as an immigrant. She paints/writes the Chinese characters “immigrant” (移民) on her left shoulder while pushing the corn field to the upper right corner of the portrait right behind her head. This compositional technique to organize formal elements of the cornfield and the “immigrant” deliberately positions Liu’s recent past in memory and makes her immigrant status more relevant to her life in America. In addition, she also paints two rats on her scarf to remind her audience of her birthday as she was born in the year of the rat (1948). Her old work ID is also collaged on the lower left corner of the portrait. It shows her official affiliation with a workplace when she was in China. Apparently, the rats and her work ID help further complicate her identity that is defined in relation to history and immigration.

In *Citizen* Liu uses bamboo in the background. Bamboo is always green in color and symbolizes longevity, modesty and maturity. It also symbolizes an unbending spirit
that denies mundane vanity and snobbery. In his introduction to flower and bird painting in ancient China, Edmund Capon discusses cultural meanings of bamboo. He says:

[bamboo] is a symbol of tenacious strength and nobility . . . [and] bends in the fierce wind but never breaks. The bamboo always played a central role in Chinese symbolism and as the most appropriate subject for an artist to express a vital and pure human quality -- that of virtue. (7)

By using bamboo in this portrait, Liu first traces her strenuous and persistent journey to get official acceptance -- citizenship -- and second portrays a mature and confident Chinese woman who does not bend easily and maintains her integrity as a Chinese American woman deeply rooted in Chinese history and culture while accepting her new country of citizenship.

Liu also uses animals such as rats and birds in two of her recent self-portraits to demonstrate her associations with Chinese culture. By positioning the animals on her shoulders, she portrays her own body as a carrier of cultural meanings. In his comprehensive studies of symbols and Chinese art motifs, C. A. S. Williams notes that “the rat is one of the symbolical animals corresponding to the first of the twelve terrestrial branches. . . . It is also regarded as the symbol of industry and prosperity on account of its ability for locating, acquiring and hoarding abundant supplies of food” (327). As discussed earlier, rats symbolize Liu’s birthday. They also remind her audience of her Chinese roots, as rats are among twelve zodiac signs in the Chinese astrology. Rats also symbolize the beginning of her American Dream and wish for a better future as an immigrant. A zodiac sign has its turn every twelve years. Liu arrived in the United States in 1984, the third circle of the year of the rat after she was born, and
started her new life. The two rats on her shoulder, then, symbolize her birth in China and rebirth in America.

In *Citizenship* Liu uses an image of a talking myna bird. Mynas are not as popular as peacocks, magpies, lovebirds, cranes, or eagles in Chinese art but they distinguish themselves as birds that can talk. Even though they only mimic what they are taught, at least they have a voice. In this sense, the myna perching on Liu’s shoulder not only exemplifies her associations with Chinese culture but also gives her voice to speak for herself. This assertive act shows a sharp contrast with *Resident Alien* that portrays a voiceless Chinese immigrant woman.

Like most traditional Chinese artists, from ancient times to the present, Liu places different signatures in her recent self-portraits. First, she uses a circle, meaning ring in Chinese, as her signature in the three portraits. Several galleries that exhibit her artworks suggest that Liu’s circle, the purest of forms, represents her signature. In 2005, Liu held her first solo exhibition at Nancy Hoffman Gallery. This is how the organizer at the gallery described her use of the circle on their official website:

> The circle, the purest of forms, is a signature for Liu. The artist uses it as a musician would use a leitmotif in a composition, punctuating the surface of the painting with a range of color. The circle or pi is an ancient Chinese symbol of the universe.”  
> In fact, the circle is not only symbolic of the universe but also “the origin of all creation” and an emblem of “eternity with the Chinese” (Williams 329). By using the circle (one of the many Chinese art motifs) Liu,

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104 The exhibition includes two series of her artwork: Relic and Visage, which honor Chinese women and comment on their place in modern China. For more information, see <http://www.nancyhoffmangallery.com/liu/2003.html>. 

226
instead of writing her name in Chinese, as she did in *Resident Alien*, invites her viewers to further examine her ties to Chinese culture and the Chineseness embedded in her identity.

Liu also provides her signature in Chinese characters to demonstrate her official status in China and America, but the location of the signature in *Immigrant* points to a change of location followed by displacement. Traditional Chinese paintings take artists’ signatures or annotations on the left-hand side of a painting. Liu provides her signature by following this tradition in *Proletarian* and *Citizen*. In *Immigrant*, however, the signature appears right on her left shoulder.

In these portraits, she uses Chinese characters rather than English to show her official status in the portraits and thus reflect the undeniable associations she has with history and Chinese and Chinese American cultures. Looking back at U.S. immigration history, English was a sign of assimilation forced upon new immigrants either on Ellis Island or on Angle Island. Contemporary debates about immigration oftentimes revolve around, among other things, language itself. Should immigrants speak and use their native languages while in America? Some states even have legislative interventions to make English the official state language. New immigration laws have also made it clear that exams for naturalization will be in English only, which sets barriers for immigrants with limited English skills. Under such circumstances, English has become a symbol of assimilation and scale to measure otherness. Liu has stated clearly that her

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105 Historical resources provide evidence of new immigrants taking English classes in response to the rhetoric of the melting pot.
responsibility was not to assimilate but to express her Chineseness. Using the Chinese language is among many of her efforts to do so.

Although Liu uses Chinese characters in these portraits, she blurs the fine line between traditional and simplified Chinese characters and complicates Chineseness in America. In reality, the simplified Chinese writing system (mainly used in P.R. China) has been colonized by traditional Chinese writing (before and outside P.R. China) and consumed as part of Chinese culture in America. In the three official portraits, instead of using simplified Chinese characters 无产者, Liu chooses traditional Chinese characters 無產者 in *Proletarian*. For an artist whose upbringing was under Mao’s totalitarian control, deliberate selection of traditional Chinese characters clearly reflects her play with meanings of Chineseness. Chinese immigrants, who are from regions and countries other than China, are generally very reluctant to identify themselves as proletarians (while in reality many of them are working class), a concept widely used during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. The concept of “proletarian” has political implications. In Mao’s classification, a proletarian was believed to be a strong supporter of revolution and communist ideology. The concept also implies poverty, as proletarians were exploited by factory owners and capitalists. After the Cultural Revolution, “proletarian” became a historical and political concept and it is barely used to describe Chinese people’s socioeconomic status today.

106 After Nationalist Party left for Taiwan and The People’s Republic of China was founded in 1949, China went through several stages to simplify Chinese characters (*jianhuaizi*). As a result, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and many other Chinese speaking countries stick to traditional Chinese characters in print or media and they are also dominant in Chinese newspapers and magazines circulated in North America. This marginalizes the younger generation from P.R. China, who had no training in reading traditional Chinese characters.
In the meantime, many Chinese immigrants reject simplified Chinese characters that represent communist China. Many Americans, however, usually do not have a sense of differences among Chinese immigrants and different ways of writing and reading Chinese. For Liu and other Chinese immigrants, differences always exist. When she uses traditional Chinese characters to translate her own officially designated identities, she designates her Chineseness as contained within Chinese American culture and at the same time highlights history as a major mediator of her identity. 107

Besides Chinese characters, naming of the three self-portraits proletarian, immigrant, and citizen leaves space for different interpretations. It is first an official naming act because the U.S. government needs to differentiate people from one another according to their affiliations with different classes, ethnic groups, or nationality. Even though the U.S. government does not use “proletarian” as a category, it could be an association with communism and describe immigrants from P.R. China. It could be Liu’s purposeful creation of alienation by using this category to describe herself. Naming is also personal because individuals also need to put themselves within certain categories in compliance with political, cultural, or social demands. Liu’s recent self-portraits show how she puts herself in certain categories. She started as a “proletarian” from Communist China without any connections with the United States. She then became “immigrant” (resident or non-resident alien). Neither “proletarian” nor “immigrant” is

107 In a sense, traditional Chinese characters can be said to represent the past for Chinese people from P.R. China because Communist China abandoned them in the early 1950s.
empowering as a subject position. Naturalization under U.S. immigration law finally grants full citizenship to Liu and eventually completes her transformation of nationality, which, however, only means a change in her immigration or legal status.

Liu glues her photo IDs -- official portraits -- on her shoulders in the three portraits. This puts more emphasis on how her body is a site to represent history and reality and how it has been through various acts of altering or being altered. In each of the portraits, she glues on her shoulder a photo ID, issued and stamped by the Chinese and American government respectively in different stages of her life. Each of them shows a Chinese woman as a fixed and static being. While it is beyond her capacity to remove the official labels, she manages to define herself within and against them -- she is what all the labels on her body have to say about her but she is more than what they show about her.

The immigrant female sent-down body is sexualized, racialized, and historicized in Liu’s self-portraits. Although sexuality or sexual experiences are only a small part of immigration experiences in these portraits, gender, race, ethnicity, history, culture, and national origin are key components of the portraits. This chapter shows how Liu uses her own body as a critical site of artistic expression to explore meanings of a resident alien standing in two worlds and in conflicting ideologies in *Resident Alien* and *A Third World*. By projecting her body in these portraits, she artistically and symbolically combines her Chinese background with her American experience. But these earlier

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[108] For a few decades during the Cold War, proletarian was equivalent to communist and people from Communist countries like China were hardly granted U.S. visas. One of the questions at visa interviews was “are you a communist party member”? Rejection was expected if an applicant had any affiliation with the Communist party. While the status of “immigrant” involves certain freedom, immigrants do not have rights granted to citizens – suffrage to social services. They could also be deported if violating U.S. laws.
works do not specifically emphasize her life as a sent-down youth during the Cultural Revolution. It is not until 2006 when she released three new self-portraits that she is able to further reflect on her historical and cultural experiences. She is who she is today because of her ties and connections with two countries, as demonstrated in the five self-portraits I have interpreted. Immigration provides Liu with mobility and further complicates her identity so that she cannot be defined in reference to only one category — Chinese or American. These portraits also demonstrate what it means to be simultaneously contained by two cultures but never completely defined by either. By complicating her identity through the use of unique subject matter, symbols, and techniques in art, Liu presents herself as an artist whose sent-down body is both historical and cultural.
Conclusion

The flow of human capital (former educated sent-down youths and many students) from Mainland China to the United States in the past thirty years has dramatically changed demographics and components of the Chinese American population as well as its cultural production. Many Chinese immigrants have introduced P.R. China to an audience that has little knowledge of this country. They share their memories of their lives in China. They also examine their new identities in America in relation to their past. The Chinese immigrant women authors and artists in my study show their audiences that female bodies participate in constructing these memories, because bodies in visual and narrative cultures are part of cultural and social memories. More important, bodies are critical sites to help remember these changes and experiences in various ways and forms.

Dani Cavallaro (2001) suggests that “the body has been the focus of increasing attention in a wide range of discipline and media. . . and has been redefined by the claim that the physical form is not only a natural reality, but also a cultural concept: a means of encoding a society’s values through its shape, size and ornamental attributes” (97-98). Leslie Bow (2001) argues similarly that “cultural changes are signified through and on the body” (8). Concurring with Cavallaro and Bow, I also argue that Chinese immigrant women’s cultural production (visual and literary narratives) in the past twenty years has
paid close attention to the Chinese female body and its role in historical and political changes and experiences. In their works, the female body is first a historical and political entity that ties sent-down youths’ lives to a country’s political history. It is abused, traumatized, disciplined, and transgressive under totalitarianism (Chen and Min). It is also a cultural concept that connects these youths’ overseas experiences with contemporary Chinese immigration in the United States (Wang and Liu). History and culture are also reciprocal in the sent-down body’s experience because history and culture are inseparable when we discuss these works and Chinese immigrants’ identities.

In my Introduction, I developed and defined “the sent-down body” as an operating term to organize my discussions of Chinese immigrant women’s visual and literary narratives of historical, cultural, and political experiences. I also discussed how body memories are an act of inscription to help us remember our past. Chapter 1 uses Joan Chen’s film *Xiu Xiu* to discuss the female sent-down body that is abused and traumatized in a political and sexual discourse that enables gender-specific violence and manipulation. Chapter 2 closely examines Anchee Min’s memoir *Red Azalea* on two levels: the disciplined and condemned female sent-down body represented in Little Green’s experiences and the transgressive female sent-down body represented in lesbian desire and alternative ways of fulfilling sexual drives and desires. These two chapters examine the impact of forced migration of sent-down youths on their sexual experiences shaped by state control and political agendas.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on a different type of the female sent-down body represented in Wang Ping’s short stories and poetry and Hung Liu’s self-portraits. In
these works, the female sent-down body is represented as the immigrant body that is sexualized and racialized. Wang’s works are positioned in two cultural and historical contexts that enable us to consider Chinese immigration in the post-Mao era in light of contemporary Chinese political and cultural history. They also point to the fact that new immigration is still embedded in Chinese American identities that are constructed around stereotypes. The linkage Wang builds in her works between cultures and histories provides a platform for a transnational reading of these works. Liu’s self-portraits can be interpreted as parallel with Wang’s works but deviate from a focus on sexuality and sexual experiences inscribed upon the female sent-down body. In her recent works, she pays more attention to establishing her connections with Chineseness while remaining an American.

Although the texts I examined in my project are from different genres, they collectively help me to answer my research question: How do representations of history, culture, and politics in art and literature help us to see how they are inscribed upon the Chinese female sent-down body in its mobility across cultures and politics. Nevertheless, there is one specific type of the female body missing in my project, which should be a topic in my future research. This body is the “mixed-blood body,” a term describing Chinese people born from interracial marriages. This body is caught in the complication of bloodline theory (xuetonglun) -- classifying individuals according to their family background and heritage -- during the Cultural Revolution, as we will see in Anchee Min’s Wild Ginger (2002).
In the meantime, although my project included relevant texts by contemporary Chinese immigrant women in America, I am also aware of similar works by Chinese immigrants living in Europe or Canada. For instance, *Daughter of the River: An Autobiography* (2000) by U.K.-based author Hong Ying and *The Water Lily Pond: A Village Girl’s Journey in Maoist China* (2004) by Canada-based author Han Z. Li can also be analyzed together with the text I examined in my project. By doing an intertextual reading of these works, I hope to use my future research to explore the linkage overseas Chinese immigrant women have in their cultural production. It will also lead me to a focus on comparative diaspora studies.
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248

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