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Recuperating Father(s) and Retracing "I" in Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*

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Abstract*:* Maxine Hong Kingston, one of the most critiqued Chinese American writers, publishes her *China Men* in 1980 as a history and genealogy of her Chinese American men. Through the stories of her father and forefathers she not only unmasks the erasure and distortions of Chinese-American history but also talks back to the hegemonic white discourse. While the book is popularly highlighted as a historical fiction where Kingston writes about her Chinese ancestors from men's point of view, an autobiographical search for "self" pervades everywhere in the narrative. In her constant struggle for recovering the father(s) from a state of silence and historical amnesia, she constructs a dialogical self in relation to history, culture, myth, and her people. Focusing on these aspects, the present article argues that in *China Men*, Kingston recuperates the father(s) from a historical loss and constructs a dialogical "I" in relation to her people especially by constructing an intersubjectivity with her father.

Keywords: Chinese-American History, Forefathers, Dialogical Self, *China Man*, Maxine Hong Kingston

"I wrote about men, China men. My concerns were to write about the other gender and a larger history".
Maxine Hong Kingston

"I wrote it for myself".
Maxine Hong Kingston

Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* (1980) is a collection of short stories about her father and forefathers who went to the Gold Mountain, the name given to America by the Chinese Americans. Kingston rewrites Chinese American history in a fictional way breaking the age-old silence regarding the contribution of the Chinese men in building America. Although the stories are all about the hardships and achievements of the Chinese American men, including her father, grandfathers, uncles and brother, Kingston associates her "I" with them in search of her identity. Instead of separating her voice from the men, her writing is a kind of autobiographical search for self by creating an intersubjectivity with her father and forefathers. Connecting her being as a writer with her poet father, and selecting the history of her forefathers as her subject matter Kingston constructs a dialogical self that reverberates everywhere in the community. Focusing on these aspects, present analysis claims that by writing *China Men* Kingston not only recuperates the history of the father(s) from silence - the silence caused by migration and the historical silence of the white America - but also retraces her "I" as a Chinese American author.

Kingston writes *China Men* as a sequel to her magnum opus *The Woman Warrior* (1976). Although critics read *The Woman Warrior* as an autobiographical work that searches for the identity they focus on *China Men* as a history book. Since its publication, Kingston's use of vignettes in the book has attracted a lot of critical attention. In many instances, the scholarship focuses on her exploitation of Chinese myths. While the critics like Frank Chin accuse Kingston of distorting Chinese myths and stereotyping Asian American reality (134), Yuan

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Yuan, for example, states that myths in *China Men* "function as a semiotic empowerment in the process of identity formation" (301). Regarding her depiction of men while Cheung claims that Kingston appreciates other gender, quite the contrary, Ailiesei argues that she writes from a feminist perspective by "taking revenge on men" (9). However, reading *China Men* as a fictional history many critics like David Li and Jutta Gsoels-Lorensen focus on Kingston's use of law and popular literature. However, in all these instances, Kingston's autobiographical search for self is overlooked in one way or another. The present study argues that Kingston mixes myths with history as an autobiographical strategy to construct her "self" in relation to her people, especially her father. The analysis claims that in the process of recuperating history from an all pervading void she recuperates the father(s) from an all pervading silence and retraces her "I" thereby.

China Men retraces the identity of Kingston in relation to her biological father, grandfathers, and mythical forefathers. Kingston validates her search for self, in the book, in one of her recent interviews with Hua Hsu as she says "I give the narrative to all these men, but there's still this voice that's me" (in Hsu 1). In fact, this search is an ongoing process of placing the individual into the community and claiming its collective memory and history. Kingston explains to Rabinowitz that she is "always very interested in how one can be an individual and part of a collective people and a collective memory" (74). Therefore, in *China Men*, Kingston's quest for constructing a dialogical self is "populated by the voices of other people, [...] decentralized with highly open boundaries, and [...] historically and culturally contextualized" **(**Hermans 2003, 90**)**. By writing the father(s)' histories/stories, Kingston relocates her position historically and culturally.

In *A Journey of Working Through: Trauma and Gender in Maxine Hong Kingston's Diaspora Trilogy,* Nan Zhang asserts that "by imagining those family men, Maxine connects with the loving father that she does not have" (46). However, this connection and reconciliation with the father are not that easy and immediate. The text begins with a deep sense of frustration and failure, since communication between the father and the daughter narrator is problematized either with silence or with the obscenities of the father's male shouts: "Dog vomit. Your mother's cunt. Your mother's smelly cunt" (*CM* 12). The gap of understanding has been exemplified in the opening chapter of *China Men*. For example, "On Fathers", while the children, taking another man as father, "surrounded him, took his hands, pressed [their] noses against his coat to sniff his tobacco smell, reached into his pockets for the Rainbo notepads and the gold coins that were really chocolates" (*CM* 6), the real father came from "the other direction [...] the one finger touching his hat to salute us" (*CM* 7). From such a state of misunderstanding, miscommunication, mental distance, and unknowability, Kingston seeks to recuperate the father in *China Men.*

In "China Men: Maxine Hong Kingston and the American Canon", David Leiwei Li appraises the story titled "On Discovery" as "a creative adaptation of one of the most famous episodes of the eighteenth-century Chinese classic, *Mirror Flower Affair*" (486). In the text, the "daughter-scholar", Tang Xiao San, was found to be in search of her father Tang Ao, a Tang Dynasty (618-907) scholar who was in a global wandering (486). According to Leiwei Li, "Tang Ao and Xiao San have become the modern incarnation of Kingston and her father, scholars like their literary predecessors. The daughter-narrator's unfolding of multiple stories in *China Men* recaptures the original theme of the quest for father", although the father is "lost in" history/silence for Kingston (486).

The narrator finds her father disinterested in making any meaningful conversation. She observes that the father listens to "the Time Lady because she is a recording you don't have to talk to. Also she distinctly names the present moment never slipping into the past or sliding into the future" (*CM* 15). Although she knows that the father lives "in the present", she wants to "hear the stories about the rest of [his] life, the Chinese stories" (*CM* 15) to find the gateway to reconnect herself with the father. Finding the father's obvious and absolute silence, she attempts to reconfigure him in her own telling.

According to Edouard Glissant, the past that has been lost into secrecy and silence cannot be retrieved in its pristine form but can be written with a vision to march forward. Believing in a similar vein Kingston feels the

necessity of relating "the complicated web of events" to know her father's past (63). Her endeavour is similar to Glissant's "*prophetic vision of the past*" (64) (emphasis original). As Glissant suggests,

> The past, to which we were subjected, which has not yet emerged as history for us, is, however, obsessively present. The duty of the writer is to explore this obsession, to show its relevance in a continuous fashion to the immediate present. This exploration is therefore related neither to a schematic chronology nor to a nostalgic lament. It leads to the identification of a painful notion of time and its full projection forward into the future. (63-4)

The narrator believes that there is speech and thought even in her father's withdrawal from talking. She knows it for sure that there must be some causes behind his non-communication. To discover the causes of her father's silence, she invites the father to talk at least in the process of mending her mistakes, as she says, "I'll tell you what I suppose from your silences and few words, and you can tell me that I'm mistaken. You'll just have to speak up with the real stories if I've got you wrong" (*CM* 15). However, nothing instigates the father to tell his stories about his life in America as an immigrant.

Therefore, to bridge the gap between the father and herself, she invents the father's story in *China Men*. Kingston illustrates that the male shouts and misogynist utterances that separated BaBa (father) from his kids are the outbursts of his victimization both as an immigrant and racial other. The narrator denotes that for BaBa, language incompetence was a barrier to his success. He was hoaxed twice by gypsies. The gypsies accused him of tearing their new clothes. Before BaBa could defend him that the clothes were already rags, the gypsies brought a policeman and "concocted a big story in English" (*CM* 13) against him. The narrator says, "you couldn't speak English well enough to counteract it. Fell for it twice. You fell for it twice" (*CM* 13). Although BaBa knew that he just fell prey to the gypsies' trick, he could not put up any resistance out of the fear of deportation.

Kingston correlates the suffering of the narrator as the child of an immigrant father with the suffering of her Chinese American father. She explains,

> When the gypsy baggage and the police pig left, we were careful not to be bad or noisy so that you would not turn on us. We knew that it was to feed us you had to endure demons and physical labor. You screamed wordless male screams that jolted the house upright and staring in the middle of the night. (*CM* 13)

Even as a daughter, she despises the father's screams; she views it as an offshoot of his frustration and exasperation in a white society. It was a means of expressing their anger that they could not show outside as Cheung asserts that "Men of color who have been abused in a white society are likely to attempt to restore their sense of masculinity by venting their anger at those who are even more powerless—the women and children in their families" (241).

Underneath the silence lies the historical experience of Chinese American men that Kingston unearths in *China Men*. According to the narrator, "worse than the swearing and the nightly screams were your silences when you punished us by not talking. You rendered us invisible, gone" (*CM* 14). In the opening section, "On Discovery", Kingston sets Tang Ao's pathetic story. In his search for Gold Mountain, when he reached "the Land of Women", the women bound his feet, pierced his ears, plucked his eyebrows, and obliged him to wear women's clothes. Although they sarcastically threatened to sew his lips, by feminizing him they metaphorically sewed his "lips together" (*CM* 4). In the face of such abuse, Tang Ao "wept with pain" (*CM* 4), but he had nothing to do but endure.

Opening with this victimized state of the Chinese American man, Kingston, in *China Men*, pinpoints the overall condition of the father and the forefathers who had been silenced and victimized in the course of their lived experience as immigrants. Upon his arrival at the sugarcane plantation, the great grandfather, Bak Goong, had to take a "vow of silence" (*CM* 100). For the "talk addict" (110), Bak Goong, the silence was so disturbing

that he used to cough in response to the oppression of the plantation overseers. He still hacked at the cane while coughing, "take—that—white—demon. Take—that. Fall—to—the—ground—demon. Cut—you—into—pieces. Chop—off—your—legs. Die—snake. Chop—you—down—stinky—demon" (*CM*114). Although such coughing would bring some momentary solace to Bak Goong, he encountered the imposed silence as devilishly disturbing. Therefore, once, he suggested that his fellow workers dig a big hole inside the earth where they all would shout together to bury their pain and anger into it.

The imposed silence that the immigrants had to endure was dehumanizing and more tortuous than death itself. Bak Goong's and his fellow mates' shouting to the earth in the big hole exemplified how repressed people might feel if they are forcefully silenced or denied the right of articulation. This truth has been mythically validated in the two brief sections following "The Great Grandfather" chapter. In these stories, Kingston defines speech as the essence of human nature. In "On Mortality", the gods were testing Tu Tzu-chun's ability to maintain silence before bestowing him with immortality. On the first test, the Taoist monk, while preparing an elixir, asked Tu Tzu-chun to keep silent on whatever he sees in his hallucinatory state. Even seeing that he and his wife were tortured, Tu Tzu-chun succeeded in observing the rule.

In the second test, he was reincarnated as a "deaf-mute female" (*CM* 121) who was married to Lu. Although initially, Lu had no complaint against Tu's silence, gradually he got terribly disturbed. Lu threatened to dash the head of their child if she did not talk. Seeing the wound of the son, Tu broke the rule of silence. This break of the rule, bound him with mortality. "On Mortality Again", Maui the Trickster attempted to steal "immortality for men and women" (*CM* 122). While taking an underwater journey, he "instructed the people, the beasts, the birds, and elements to be silent" (*CM* 122). All maintained silence when Maui entered the body of sleeping Hina through her vagina and "took her heart in his arms" (*CM* 122). His almost successful adventure was destroyed suddenly "when a bird, at the sight of his legs wiggling out of her vagina, laughed" (*CM* 122). The moment the silence was broken, Hina woke up, "shut herself, and Maui died" (*CM* 122). With the death of Maui, human beings' desire for immortality has forever remained impossible. With these stories, Kingston claims that if mortality defines a human being, this mortality they embraced denying silence or breaking silence. From the depiction of the plights of the Chinese American forefathers, it is discernible how inhumane it was to deny the Chinese immigrants the right to articulate the feelings of love, hatred, anger, and pain. Exposure to such dehumanizing and torturous ambiance made these Chinese forefathers silent even in their personal and familial life, especially to their wives and children.

While the labourers in the plantations have been literally silenced, the Chinese men's contributions to America's infrastructural development have been silenced historically. In "The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains", with the story of the grandfather, Ah Goong, Kingston retraces that history and reclaims her forefathers as the founding fathers of America. For years after years, Ah Goong as a railroad worker, blew up the tree stumps with gun powder. He had been "lowered to the bottom of a ravine, which had to be cleared for the base of a trestle" (*CM* 132). He risked his life setting dynamite charges into cliff faces and tunnelling through the mountains. When the railroad was done, the Americans boasted "only Americans could have done it" and celebrated it as "The Greatest Feat of the Nineteenth Century" (*CM* 145). "While the demons posed for photographs, the China Men dispersed" (*CM* 145). Their contribution is buried in the historical silence. Once the railroad is done, the Chinese men were ousted. Moreover, in different plantations, the plantation overseers "tied pigtails to horses and dragged chinamen" (*CM* 146). Writing the silencing histories of her forefathers Kingston recuperates them from the "history monopolized by the dominant American culture" (Zhang and Wang 1032).

BaBa (the father) is the third generation of Chinese American men whose condition is no better than his forefathers. Although "BaBa was lured to America by the stories of the Gold Mountain, which were retold and relished in his family" (Zhang and Wang 1030), the miscegenation law was still in effect, and the lonely China man's search for fortune continued through a life of hard struggle. While his immigrant forefathers buried their words of anger into the earth, BaBa adopted non-communication and found consolation in angry "shouts". For money, BaBa "rolled cigarettes and cigars ('Mexican cigarettes') and worked in the sugarcane fields" (*CM* 48).

BaBa's hands, "splintery with calluses 'caused by physical labor'" (*CM* 240), symbolize the overall condition of the Chinese American men who went to Gold Mountain in search of fortune. Among the hurdles and discriminations, BaBa created a small space in Stockton Chinatown, opening a laundry for him. Indeed, laundry business was the mere means of survival for many Chinese immigrants in America. In *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*, historian Ronald Takaki notes, "The Chinese were located in a different sector of the labor market from whites. By 1920, 58 percent of the Chinese were in services, most of them in restaurant and laundry work, compared to only 5 percent for native whites and 10 percent for foreign whites" (240). BaBa's "Four Valuable Things: ink, inkslab, paper, and brush" (*CM* 16) that the grandmother thought would determine his fortune as a lucky scholar were not of any use in a racist and capitalist America. BaBa's scholarship, his mind of a poet, could not bring him any recognition in the changed socio-cultural status quo. The laundry workers' inhumane condition has been documented in Paul C.P. Siu's *The Chinese Laundryman: A Study of Social Isolation*. Siu observes that the laundry workers used to work no less than six and a half-day a week. From his careful observation of the Sam Moy Laundry in Chicago, he documents that the business would start at eight in the morning and close, not before half-past eleven at night. So the workers had to work fourteen to fifteen hours a day (in Siu 130). Their only happiness was the supper, "a heavy meal, a big bowl of soup and large dishes of meat and vegetables" (in Siu 74). They could not sleep before one o'clock since they needed to cool the heated body off in the yard before they went to bed (74). BaBa's frustration and anger resulting from the unending struggle made him silent and mysterious to the American-born children.

In reality, BaBa represents the generation of Chinese Americans who travelled to the unknown world to support their families left in China. BaBa's sacrifice is similar to the sacrifice of the rabbit in the "White Tigers" where the rabbit jumped into the fire to feed Fa Mu Lan in *The Woman Warrior*. Kingston notes, "[M]y father was born in a year of the Rabbit [...]. In one of his incarnations, one of the Buddhas was a rabbit; he jumped alive into a fire to feed the hungry" (*CM* 15). Since "one of the Buddhas was a rabbit", BaBa is even similar to the self-sacrificing and abnegating Buddha. The daughter's view of her father as a sacrificing provider comes forth as she says, "we know that it was to feed us you had to endure demons and physical labour" (*CM* 13). Being haunted by the incidents of his friends ganged upon him, the seizure of the gambling house, he "screamed in his sleep", dreaming "ax murders" (*CM* 251) of his relatives in China. The inner struggle of his suspected inability to send money for them is expressed in his "Night sweats" and "Fear sweats" (*CM* 251). In "Writing the Other: A Conversation with Maxine Hong Kingston", Kingston remarked to Marilyn Chin that, "it's a generation that did everything for their children. They pretty much sacrificed their lives so their children could have an education, so that the children could go on" (Chin 98). BaBa sacrificed not only for his children but also for his people in China.

BaBa symbolizes this generation of the Chinese Americans who went to Gold Mountain and adjusted there in the face of all adversities. Bak Goong's and Ah Goong's labour in the plantations and in the railroads, respectively, and BaBa's labour in the laundry are all the same history of abject physical labour. They all are like the man in the swamp who did not want to return to China even in his worst difficulties since he had a wife and children for whom he had to earn. Although America in no way was comfortable to the immigrants, they somehow adjusted the way uncle Sham Bak "stuffed the toes" (*CM* 17) in the pair of leather shoes brought back from the Gold Mountain.

Kingston's purpose in *China Men* is evident as she asserts, "I want to talk to Cantonese, who have always been revolutionaries, nonconformists, people with fabulous imaginations, people who invented the Gold Mountain" (*CM* 87). Nonetheless, the father's all-pervading silence deprives her of memory and history. She seeks to reconstruct him in her imagination by mythologizing the father. In the daughter's imagination, BaBa takes birth in 1891 or 1903, or 1911 in China. Therefore, the father's age cannot be precisely determined. In "Chinese Ghost Story", Frederic Wakeman Jr. suggests, if the father from China took part in the "qualifying test for the last Imperial Examination ever given" (*CM* 24), held in 1905, the probability of his birth in the year, 1903 can easily be erased since he "would have been far too young to have sat for" (Wakeman n.p.). On the other

hand, if he were born in 1891, he would have been older than the girl narrator's grandfather. Therefore, Wakeman aptly asserts, instead of "Kingston's real father [...] her mythical father takes them" (n.p.).

Her father's silence in the face of his age, his life in China, or his arrival in America has paradoxically created ample space for the narrator to imagine and create multiple versions of her father's story. In a version, she imagined that her father was born in San Francisco, "where [her] grandmother had come disguised as a man" (*CM* 231). Thus, BaBa turns into an American citizen. In fact, with "the gift of various fabulous versions of his-story", Kingston discovers her collective history (Goellnicht 206). Kingston reverberates with Herman's hypothesis that to construct and reconstruct "their own history, they had to study their own mind in relation to its products in order to comprehend the particular cultural situation in which they lived" (Hermans 2001, 271). In the process of claiming America, therefore, Kingston reconstructs the father's history as her own. She suggests many impossible possibilities of his historical age and provides many possible ways of his entrance into America. Kingston explains to Timothy Pfaff that, in the course of the book, "I have him coming into this country in five different ways. I'm very proud of that" (17). The contradicting and intersecting immigration stories, indeed, are not reflections of Kingston's doubt and uncertainty; rather, these are probable imaginations which solidify her connection with her ancestry. In her essay "Maxine Hong Kingston", Susan Currier observes, "the underlying assumption is that imaginative repetitions and transformations will approach a more significant truth than will the mere compilation of fact" (237).

Currier's observation can be substantiated with Kingston's emphasis on her family values of dream life and story-telling, as she notes:

> We would wake up in the morning for breakfast, and everybody tells what each other's dreams are. This was confirmed for me when I go to Asia [...]. One of my aunts in Hong Kong came to pick me up. The first thing she asks is "How is your mother and what is she dreaming?" (in Sabine 6)

To Bonetti, Kingston expresses her "faith in the imaginary world" and "in talk-story" (Bonetti in Sabine 47). Her confidence in their power to build "a bridge toward reality" (Fishkin in Sabine 47) helps her "create truth" (Sabine 47) in multiple stories of her father's birth and entry into America. Kingston depicts the father as a representative of Chinese men, through whose life other Chinese American men's lives are readily available. Providing different interpretations to BaBa's story, Kingston sets him in others' stories since she views every Chinese man as a father figure. For example, critiquing the way the Chinese men were treated at the Immigration Station on Angel Island, she says, "this was not the way a father ought to have been greeted" (*CM* 53). Although Kingston claims that BaBa "made a legal trip" (*CM* 48), he was depicted undergoing the perennial horrors which all the illegal immigrants share; as Kingston says, "various futures raced through his mind: walking the plank, drowning, growing old in jail, being thrown overboard in chains, flogged to tell where others were hiding, hung by the neck, returned to China—all things that happened to caught chinamen" (*CM* 49).

As an author, the intertextuality that she created between the Chinese oral tradition and her writing directly came down to her from the intersubjectivity that she and her father shared. Kingston discovered that her father in China was a poet and scholar. Being disappointed at his student's apathy in poetry, he decided to look for fortune in America. Even at the time of migrating to America, BaBa took the four valuable things of writing poetry: ink, ink slab, paper, and brush to the new land. Kingston identifies the father with "Yüeh Fei, the patriot" whose mother "carved on his back" (*CM* 56). BaBa lent his power in his poetry since he "wrote about wanting freedom" (*CM* 56). Poetry is so important to her father that he carried with him the poems of Li Po, "the best poet, the Heavenly Poet, the Great White light, Venus" (*CM* 57) of China. Upon his arrival in Gold Mountain, he wrote a poem on the wall, but he did not sign his name below his poem. Although the father is alienated from his creativity and imagination in the face of the cruelty of migration, Kingston brings that creativity back by writing *China Men*.

To Skenazy, Kingston said that her father inserted "responses, corrections [and] additions" (155) as marginalia to a pirated, Cantonese version of *China Men*. For Kingston, these annotations bear grave significance not because the father praised the daughter's artistic integrity but because those are the marks of his lost dignity as a writer. Optimistically Kingston asserts, "what makes me feel really good is that this is communication between me and my father, and may be this is the best and only way that we will ever communicate; maybe it serves us right because we're both writers" (in Skenazy 155).

In the text, the "father places" the narrator secretly explored as a child are very important for her to reconnect herself with the father and reclaim her collective identity through him. Since discovering those places is like her discovery that she "belonged to him" (in Sabine 157). "One of his places is the dirt cellar", which was always kept locked since there is a bottomless "well down there" (*CM* 238). Once, finding the cellar door open, the daughter followed her father secretly. Discovering him lifting the lid that covered the well she came out of the hiding and "saw it —a hole full of shining, bulging, black water, alive, alive, like an eye, deep and alive"(*CM* 238). Standing on the "brink of a well, the end and edge of the ground," wrote Kingston, it was "the opening to the inside of the world" which "must lead to the other side of the world" (*CM* 238-9). She fantasized that if she fell in she would "come out in China" (*CM* 238). Thus, the girl considers the well a connector between her ancestral homeland and her birthplace, respectively, China and America. If the mother stands for China, the father links her to both of her heritage through a middle passage indicated with the "middle of the world" (*CM* 239).

The well of the cellar connects the narrator with her father and gives her the creative surge. Kingston imagined that the father and the daughter dialogically conversed in the "wobble of black jello" (*CM* 240) that the well looked like to the daughter. The daughter says, "I find silver in it. It sparked" (*CM* 240). The black jello can be compared to the ink that the father carried with him as one of the four valuable things, which his mother gave him during his first birthday. Though the father could not make use of that as a writer, the daughter found "silver in it"—the power of words— and wrote down her father's history. Therefore, it can be considered as the beginning of her creative spark that the father failed to explore in the face of harsh realities. The dusty dirt cellar symbolizes both the pigsty and the sand where the no name aunt and Ts'ai Yen gave birth in *The Woman Warrior*. When the aunt gave birth in the pigsty, she gazed up to "the black well of sky and stars" (*WW* 16). The daughter narrator's discovery of the silver stars in the black well is the moment of her metaphorical birth as a writer who searches for the father in *China Men* and recuperates the histories buried in silence.

Apart from the cellar, Kingston discerns the attic of their new home, the gambling house, and the laundry as the places where the "father belongs" (*CM* 238). While the cellar was dirty and abandoned, the "attic air was hot, too thick, smelling like pigeons" (*CM* 239). The gambling house was also abandoned and "smelled like cat piss" (*CM* 240), which the father cleaned and decorated to start anew. The laundry was also hot that sucked his energy to the last. Kingston writes, "there was a trap door on the floor inside the laundry, and BaBa looked like a trap-door spider when he pulled it over his head or lifted it, emerging" (*CM* 254). The image of the father as crawling like an insect is, in fact, a vivid portrait of his condition in the foreign land. All of the father places that the narrator explores in "The American Father" depict the real image of the fathers' struggle.

Depicting all the father places as sites of hide and seek, Kingston identifies her own place with them. While hiding from the hated Great uncle who undermines the girls as "maggots", she metaphorically digs out her origin and her place of belonging. Kingston writes:

> I liked hiding in the dark, which could be anywhere. The cellar door sloped overhead, a room within the storeroom within the basement [...]. I was safely tucked away among the bags of old clothes and shoes, the trunks and crates the grown-ups had brought with them from China, the seabags with the addresses in English and Chinese, the tools, the bags and bottles of seeds, the branches of seeds and leaves and pods hanging upside down, and the drying loofahs. Outside the cellar door, the pigeons purred, the chickens squawked, and a turkey and a dog, a rooster, a train made their noises. In the middle of the basement, the swing my father had hung from a beam bounced and squeaked when Kau Goong walked over it; at night ghosts played on that

> swing. I thought over useless things like wishes, wands, hibernation. I talked to the people whom I knew were not really there. I became different, complete, an orphan; my partners were beautiful cowgirls, and also men, cowboys who could talk to me in conversations; I named this activity Talking Men. (*CM* 180-1)

This "room within a room, within a room", is named as a "nonplace of writerly productivity" by Rabine (481). However, Rabine suggests that these are the places where daughters stay "hidden from the fathers, unseen and unrecognized by them" (481). However, for Kingston, it is the place where "intersubjectivity [...] first arises" (Sabine 158) since, in the absence of parents, a recognition with them takes place with fantasy and reality. With the seabags, tools, bags, and bottles of seeds, with the addresses in English and Chinese, this transitional space helped her contact the generations of Chinese immigrants who came to America with bags full of seeds and lived in a space between two cultures.

Moreover, with her imaginary talk with the "cowgirls" and "cowboys", Kingston enlivens the imagination that was the only means of survival in the face of all obstacles for the generation of men like Ah Goong. Kingston deployed her creative genius to depict the "talking man". With the metaphor of "Talking Men", she invents the necessity of telling that symbolizes action and route to the embodiment of the racial and gendered subject. It is the "spatialization of dialogical relationships [which] allows for the treatment of a particular idea in the context of both interior and exterior dialogues, creating ever changing perspectives" (Hermans 2003, 94).

Thus, the father places connect struggle, birth, creativity and imagination in such a manner that the father and Kingston identify with one another. These are all places from where the fathers' history of "sadness and anger" (*WW* 248) comes out. They fight, endure and write poetry. Although the father himself is a poet and scholar, instead of articulating, he muffled his anger in silence, to what Kingston gives voice. She revitalizes Chinese oral tradition in American written form. In their quests for identities while the father fought physically, Kingston fights with pen. In the form of Chinese talk-story, she articulates the history of the struggle of the Chinese American people and digs out her paternal ancestry in the eighteen sections of *China Men*. Breaking the silence of Chinese American history she retrieves the story of her father(s) from a state of historical loss and conjoins her being with them. By writing about "the other gender and a larger history" (Lim 159), she constructs her "self" and retraces her "I" by positing herself as a part of a larger community.

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