

Heterogeneous Representations of Chinese Women in Young Adult Literature: A Postcolonial Reading

James C. Greenlaw

Résumé: Les écrivains occidentaux ont toujours donné une vision réductrice de la culture chinoise. Dans les films et les romans présentant des personnages chinois, les femmes sont toujours conformes aux stéréotypes de la "femme-dragon" ou de la "jeune fille-fleur de lotus". À la lumière des théories du discours orientaliste d'Edward Saïd et de Lisa Lowe, le présent article montre les différences dans la présentation des Chinoises entre les auteurs d'ascendance européenne et les écrivains sino-canadiens et américains.

Summary: Orientalist texts by Western writers have traditionally tended to essentialize Chinese culture and to stereotype Chinese people. In books and films which contain Chinese characters, but which have been produced by dominant culture North American and European authors and directors, representations of Chinese women have usually conformed to the stereotypes of the "dragon lady" or the "lotus blossom baby." In the following analysis, the postcolonial literary theories of Edward Said, Lisa Lowe, and others are used to compare the depictions of Chinese women which can be found in Eurocentric texts with the more heterogeneous representations to be discovered in Chinese American and Chinese Canadian literature for young adults.

In postcolonial literary theory, narratives are thought to be contested terrains in which the discourses of imperialism and its Others struggle for control over how people and places are to be represented. Edward Said, the leading postcolonial theorist of the past two decades, has recently emphasized just how important to the study of literature is a theory which accounts, on the one hand, for the ways cultural representations are affected by imperialism and, on the other, for the ways imperialist nations depend upon narratives of empire for much of their control over colonial subjects. In Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), the sequel to his foundational work of postcolonial theory, *Orientalism* (1978), he explains how the literary texts of empire and its Others are "rich cultural documents" (20) in which the literary student as ethnographer can find evidence of the imperial interaction as it is experienced by members of both metropolitan and marginal communities.

Of central importance to postcolonial theory, as Said elucidates it, is the notion that imperial hegemony, subaltern resistance, and the production of narratives are inextricably linked both in the centres of empire and at its periphery:

Stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized people use to assert their identity and the existence of their own history. *The main battle in imperialism is over land, of course; but when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back, and who now plans its future—these issues were reflected, contested, and even for a time decided in narrative.* As one critic has suggested, nations themselves are narrations. The power to narrate, or block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes

one of the main connections between them. Most important, the grand narratives of emancipation and enlightenment mobilized people in the colonial world to rise up and throw off imperial subjection; in the process many Europeans and Americans were also stirred by these stories and their protagonists, and they too fought for new narratives of equality and human community. (xii-xiii)

Where, in the past, empire's Others were routinely defined in dominant culture discourse as primitive, lazy, mysterious, or exotic, once these individuals seized the opportunities to produce their own oppositional discourses in a variety of resistance literatures, the old stereotypes were replaced with complex representations of self and place. For postcolonial literary theorists, then, culture is seen as an important vehicle for identity formation.¹ But, because from the postcolonial perspective culture itself is viewed as a highly fluid and heterogeneous formation, constructed out of the discourses of its dominant and subaltern groups, the fashioning of such identities was never a one-sided affair. Rather, it involves for imperialism's oppressed Other the subverting and opposing of imperialist discourse at the same time as those useful features of dominant culture narratives are appropriated by the oppressed as strategic weapons in their decolonizing struggles: "We begin to sense that old authority cannot simply be replaced by new authority, but that new alignments made across borders, types, nations, and essences are rapidly coming into view, and it is those new alignments that now provoke and challenge the fundamentally static notion of identity that has been the core of cultural thought during the era of imperialism" (xxiv-xxv).

Said terms his postcolonial approach to the deconstruction of static cultural identities a comparative literature of imperialism.² Rather than simply accepting either the discourses of imperialism or those of its different subject groups as the ultimate truths about Western and Third World identities, therefore, postcolonial theorists such as Said employ their methods of comparative analysis in order to search for the points at which these discourses overlap and intertwine.

Said's *Orientalism*, for example, was one of the first postcolonial studies to reveal how Western discourse has created the idea of the "Oriental" as inferior. For centuries European and North American scholars have written government and newspaper reports, novels and short stories, translations of Oriental fiction, linguistic, historical, religious, philosophical, anthropological and geographical studies about Middle and Far Eastern cultures. But, when the values underlying this vast body of scholarship are deconstructed by Said, he reveals that these Orientalist "texts can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe. In time such knowledge and reality produce a tradition, or what Michel Foucault calls a discourse, whose material presence or weight, not the originality of a given author, is really responsible for the texts produced out of it" (94). The Orientalist attitude in general shares "with magic and with mythology the self-containing, self-reinforcing character of a closed system, in which objects are what they are because they are what they are, for once, for all time, for ontological reasons that no empirical material can either dislodge or alter" (70).

Out of the Orientalists' quest to discover the essential Chinese, or Egyptian,

or Indian mentality came a plethora of stereotypes to which Westerners subsequently expected these peoples to conform. Jonathan Spence, in his analysis of twentieth-century Western fictional depictions of China and the Chinese, has observed that Westerners “do not understand China and so we constantly invent it; and what we think we know is constantly disproved” (100). One example analysed by Spence is James Clavell’s *Taipan*. He claims that Western readers prefer to read novels in which the protagonist, the narrator and some of the other characters as well are Western, so that they can use the dialogue and observations of the individuals in order to get their bearings.

Spence identifies specific genres which, he feels, help to “illuminate our own history” more than they enable Westerners to understand the Chinese. “Six [such genres] are apparent: first, fictions which deal with the Chinese within China; secondly, those in which Westerners within China are the focus; thirdly, the world of overseas Chinese; fourthly, the uses made of China as a focus for political statements; fifthly, the fictional value of scholars in China; and finally, the possibilities of what might be called ‘internal’ Chinas, in which the country itself begins to fade into another mode of discourse” (100-101). If readers become aware of how each of these genres (mis)represent the Chinese from Eurocentric perspectives, then they will be better able to deconstruct such texts as they supplement them with various Chinese representations of their culture and people.

Much as Spence has done with his analysis of novels about China by the British, Renee E. Tajima points out in her article, “Lotus Blossoms Don’t Bleed” (1989), that the American movie industry has also perpetuated stereotypical (mis)representations of Asians:

[Images of Asian women] have remained consistently simplistic and inaccurate during the sixty years of largely forgettable screen appearances. There are two basic types: the Lotus Blossom Baby (a.k.a. China Doll, Geisha Girl, shy Polynesian beauty), and the Dragon Lady (Fu Manchu’s various female relations, prostitutes, devious madames). There is little in between, although experts may differ as to whether Suzie Wong belongs to the race-blind “hooker with a heart of gold” category, or deserves one all of her own. (309)³

By deconstructing such Orientalist stereotypes postcolonial theorists demonstrate how literary representations have provided Western writers with endless opportunities to (mis)represent Asians. The questions which these theorists raise about representations of the Oriental Other can help young readers to open up the borders of their imaginations and to confront the stereotypical simplifications and exaggerations which writers sometimes employ in the construction of fictive worlds. To illustrate how this might be accomplished I will begin my comparison of three books about the Chinese by examining how one of Canada’s award-winning writers of young adult fiction has represented a Chinese woman in his novel.

William Bell’s *Forbidden City* (1990) provides an excellent introduction to contemporary China for high school students who are unfamiliar with its recent history and cultural contexts. Bell has been a teacher of high-school English in Canada for many years and has also taught in China. He knows his audience of

Canadian high school English students very well, and he has obviously taken great care to fill in as much background detail as he can about Emperor Chin, Buddhism, the Chinese Communist Revolution, etc., so that his adolescent readers can develop a rudimentary understanding of Chinese society. He even provides a map of Beijing at the end of the book so that students can construct a clear picture in their minds of where the events in the novel have taken place. The accuracy of Bell's vivid descriptions of Beijing's streets, hotels, temples, and homes provides a strong sense of place for readers who have never lived there.

In Bell's novel the terrifying events of the Tian An Men massacre are seen through the eyes of Alex Jackson, a Canadian high school student who lives in Beijing from April 1 to June 9 of 1989. Alex travels to China with his father, Ted Jackson, a video camera operator for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation who is posted to Beijing to cover Russian President Gorbachev's visit to the Chinese capital. Before Alex leaves Canada one of his teachers tells him to keep a journal of his experiences to submit for course credit when he returns home. Thus the novel is narrated in the first person as Alex writes progressively more suspenseful and disturbing diary entries about his activities in Beijing.

During the Communist Party's June 4th crackdown on student demonstrators Alex becomes separated from his father and then seriously wounded. However, before he is struck in the leg by a bullet, Alex manages to record secret video footage of the incredible carnage caused by the Chinese army's use of tanks and machine guns to clear Tian An Men Square. For the next few days he is nursed and guided by the student dissident, Xin-hua, a courageous young woman who risks her life in order to help Alex smuggle his videotapes of the massacre out of the country so that the rest of the world can learn the truth about the killings. The poetically rich journal entries with their riveting passages of description and dialogue pull adolescent readers into the tragedy of Tian An Men and help them to view the lives of its victims at close range through the eyes of Alex. Nevertheless, according to the classifications provided by Spence about Western fictional representations of the Chinese, because this novel is primarily about a Canadian teenager's experiences in Beijing, the Chinese who appear in the book have been described from the outside and are therefore relatively stereotypical in comparison with Alex. So if teachers of this novel wish to move their students beyond a superficial appreciation of characters such as Xin-hua, it would be helpful, I believe, to encourage them to reconsider these characters from perspectives other than those of Alex.

They could, for example, write a diary which parallels the one written by Alex but, instead, from the point of view of Xin-hua. This would require the students, however, to read extensively from other sources such as the Internet's ChinaNet News Forum which carries first hand accounts by China's dissidents about their experiences during and following the Tian An Men massacre. Students could also watch archival television footage of the events and of the interviews which happened during and after the crackdown. But even these activities might not fully enable students to appreciate the complexity of an individual such as Xin-

hua whose role in the novel is limited to saving Alex's life, having a few brief discussions with him about the importance of his videotapes, and then being executed for trying to transport him to the airport.

Another way to encourage students to examine heterogeneous representations of the Chinese, so that they do not fall into the Orientalist habit, for instance, of stereotyping Xin-hua as a "Lotus Blossom Baby" whose main role in life is to serve as the love interest for European or North American protagonists, is to encourage them to read as well depictions of the Chinese written by Chinese authors.

Maxine Hong Kingston's autobiographical novel, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976), depicts several fascinatingly complex Chinese and Chinese American women who can enable Canadian adolescents to overcome Eurocentric thinking about Chinese people. Kingston's novel stands at the intersection of many interesting Chinese and American textual terrains as it introduces readers to the voices which haunted the young Maxine during her teens in 1950s California. There are several women in the novel whose words terrify and inspire her as she experiences her own warrior apprenticeship. For example, Maxine encounters the legend of Mu Lan, a heroine of Chinese mythology who learns the mysteries of the martial arts while visiting with a magical old man and woman on a mountaintop near her village. When Mu Lan returns years later to her family's home she discovers that an evil Emperor has been persecuting the peasants in her village. She therefore decides to become their military leader and guides her avenging troops to victory. From the tale of Mu Lan young Maxine learns to appreciate the importance of fighting heroically when the cause is just. Another interesting woman warrior in the novel is Maxine's mother, Brave Orchid, who uses the traditional Chinese story-telling technique of "talk-story" to describe for her daughter how, in her youth, she overcame many obstacles and studied diligently, in order to become a doctor and exorcist before moving from China to the United States with her husband. But perhaps the most haunting of all the warrior figures in the novel is Maxine's aunt, No Name Woman. At the beginning of the novel Brave Orchid warns Maxine against the dangers of extra-marital sex by telling her about the tragic fate of her aunt. After suffering abuse and rejection at the hands of her relatives for becoming pregnant while her husband was living abroad, No Name Woman gives birth in a pig pen. She then places a curse upon her in-laws by drowning herself and her newborn baby in the family well. The struggles which Maxine encounters while being torn between the demands of Chinese and American cultural values, provide young readers with excellent opportunities to consider in their own writing what are some of the challenges of growing up as a Chinese-American woman.

A postcolonial reading of *The Woman Warrior* in the manner of Said's "comparative literature of imperialism" should not, however, attempt to show how Kingston has captured the essence of the Chinese culture. What makes her protagonist so interesting is the way in which, by possessing a problematically hyphenated identity, the young Maxine is able to question both essentialist

notions of what it means to be Chinese and what it means to be American. Thus, by reading this novel intertextually, for example, with *Forbidden City*, adolescent readers can begin to interrogate the Orientalist assumptions which they may have developed by viewing films and reading books which contain a Eurocentric bias. It then becomes difficult for them to think stereotypically about Chinese culture and Chinese people, when Kingston provides them with such heterogeneous representations of both.

A brief survey of the critical reactions to Kingston's novel among Chinese American reviewers, indicates how complicated the intertextual relationship is between texts produced by mainstream and minority writers. As Lisa Lowe has observed about interpretations by Chinese Americans of Maxine Hong Kingston's novel, there have been some interesting differences of opinion concerning Kingston's goals and skill in crafting her tale. Because Kingston's book is, according to Lowe, "virtually the only 'canonized' piece of Asian American literature" (33), it is considered by many critics such as Frank Chin⁴ and Benjamin Tong to carry the burden of representing Chinese culture to American readers. In that capacity these men argue that *The Woman Warrior* is assimilationist and, therefore, untrue to the essence of the Chinese people. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong describes Benjamin Tong's position in this way:

Tong accuses Kingston of being purposeful in mistranslating Chinese terms to suit white tastes so that her book would sell better. "She has the sensibility but no conscious, organic connection with [Cantonese] history and psychology ... If she and I were ever to meet, she would know that I know she knows she's been catching pigs [tricking whites out of their money by giving them what they think is Chinese] at too high a price—the selling out of her own people." (3)

In Shirley Geok-lin Lim's interpretation of *Woman Warrior* she points out that "Kingston's books are marked by intertextuality—that is, by layers of interpretations of earlier literatures and, consequently, by a stylistic inventiveness" (245). Thus Maxine finds herself as audience, agent, and participant in stories that are based on both the mythic and historic China. In Veronica Wang's interpretation of *Woman Warrior* she asserts that Maxine has to reconcile the "reality or fiction of Chinese heritage that reaches her through her mother's mythical yet authoritative 'talk-stories'" (23) and the equally confusing messages that she encounters through her American experiences and education:

Both heritages impose external limitations and demand prescribed behaviours even though she is constantly aware of the remoteness of ancestral China and her essential separation from it, as well as her marginal status of exclusion and alienation in the American society. As a Chinese-American woman, Maxine must come to terms with her past and present, with China and America, with woman-as-slave and woman-as-warrior, and thus find her own identity and voice, one that is not externally imposed but self-expressive, born painfully out of the experience of alienation and suffering. (23)

Lisa Lowe finds just such a heterogeneous view of Chinese-American culture, for example, in Amy Tan's novel, *The Joy Luck Club* (1989):

By contrasting different examples of mother-daughter discord and concord, *Joy Luck* allegorizes the heterogeneous culture in which the desire for identity and sameness (represented by Jing-mei's

story) is inscribed within the context of Asian American differences and disjunctions (exemplified by the other three pairs of mothers and daughters). The novel formally illustrates that the articulation of one, the desire for identity, depends upon the existence of the others, or the fundamental horizon of differences.

Further, although *Joy Luck* has been heralded and marketed as a novel about mother-daughter relations in the Chinese-American family (one cover review characterizes it as a “story that shows us China, Chinese-American women and their families, and the mystery of the mother-daughter bond in ways that we have not experienced before”), I would suggest that the novel also represents antagonisms that are not exclusively generational but are due to different conceptions of class and gender among Chinese-Americans. (36)

Like Kingston, Tan is attempting to analyze mother-daughter relationships in the context of the intercultural differences between China and the United States. Tan’s autobiographical fiction is similar to Kingston’s in that it contains ingenious experiments with narrative technique. For example, in Tan’s four interconnected sets of mother-daughter relationships, she uses exemplary tales told by mothers to daughters, confessional tales told by mothers to the reader and by daughters to the reader, overlapping mother and daughter stories, overlapping daughter narratives, symbolic and thematic connections between the tales, and a frame narrative in which Jing-mei Woo and her sisters are finally united in the last chapter of the book. Tan also plays deconstructively with the novel’s many binary oppositions such as natural/supernatural, yin/yang, madness/reason, China/U.S.A., invisible strength/foolish pride, drowning/surfacing, white husbands/Chinese husbands, sweetness/bitterness, and mother/daughter which each enable the reader to question stereotypical representations of these differences.

Although both Kingston and Tan have produced wonderful novels with which to introduce Canadian adolescent readers to complex representations of first, second, and third generation Chinese women in North America, there are also many excellent Chinese Canadian writers whose works deal with similar themes but within the Canadian context. *Many-Mouthed Birds: Contemporary Writing by Chinese Canadians* (1991), for instance, is an anthology whose editors, Bennett Lee and Jim Wong-Chu, have brought together stories and poetry by some of Canada’s finest Chinese Canadian authors.⁵

In the text’s introduction Lee explains the origins of its title. It comes from a Chinese expression used to describe someone who talks too much. “The point is, you are being indiscreet because you are saying things that you should keep to yourself, that not everyone wants to hear, that may get you into trouble” (7-8). When Jim Wong-Chu was interviewed by Jurgen Hesse in his book, *Voices of Change: Immigrant Writers Speak Out* (1990), about his experiences as a maturing poet in Hong Kong and British Columbia, Wong-Chu pointed out that he found it difficult to speak out in a community where talking too much is frowned upon:

I couldn’t understand why I always averted my eyes and felt humble and little in front of somebody who had any kind of authority over me, even though they were wrong. I could not speak for myself. I knew there were all these ghosts in my past that kept recurring, and I felt I had to deal with it if I wanted to be a whole person. (197)

During the past century the lives of Chinese Canadians have been profoundly affected by the racist attitudes and actions of Canada's dominant culture. Given the history of imperial oppression towards minority groups in Canada it should not be at all surprising to learn from writers such as Wong-Chu that they have had difficulty making themselves heard in a society which deliberately silenced and excluded them for so many years. For example, after the Chinese were no longer needed as a source of cheap labour with which to build the trans-Canada railroad, numerous bills were passed to restrict their rights, the most notorious of which was the 1923 Chinese Immigration Act "which excluded the Chinese from entering Canada for twenty-four years before it was repealed" (Bolaria and Li 2). As Bennett Lee points out in his introduction to *Many-Mouthed Birds* the vast majority of Chinese settlers were men who were forced to leave their prospective wives behind in China:

By the time they had earned some economic security for themselves here in Canada, restrictive legislation prevented them from bringing others out. Because so many were unable to marry or have families, the Chinese community was for many decades a predominantly bachelor society, living in a kind of limbo between two worlds, with little hope for the future. (2)

In one of the anthology's short stories, "Prairie Night 1939," by Paul Yee, the protagonist, Gordon, struggled to decide whether or not he should remain in small town Saskatchewan earning money from his restaurant, or return to China so that he and his wife could fulfil their obligation to Gordon's mother by raising sons. Alone, a hundred miles from the nearest Chinese, Gordon knew there was no point in enraging himself and sacrificing his health over the hypocrisy of his white, Christian masters. "The townspeople wanted doughnuts and a quiet Chinaman, and Gordon needed remittance money and peace" (54). But when he went back to China to marry his seventeen-year-old bride, he was equally alienated from his surroundings there:

Too many people fighting for the same smelly plots of land. Beggars clawing at passengers at the train station, and barefoot children hawking tea in caked enamel cups. And the vigilance over money exhausted him: it had to be concealed from the eyes of preying officials and guarded from the smiles of greedy relatives. (53)

Because of the Chinese Immigration Act Gordon's wife was not allowed to enter Canada. Those Chinese women who were able to slip past the authorities or who had entered the country before 1923, found their lives negatively affected by Canada's racist immigration policies. In two other stories from *Many-Mouthed Birds* the women who are described by Sky Lee in an excerpt from *Disappearing Moon Cafe* and by Denise Chong in an excerpt from *The Concubine's Children* are wonderfully complex individuals who manage to enter Canada in 1924. Their stories shatter the stereotypical notions of Chinese women perpetuated in many dominant culture representations of them.

Chinese Canadian writers' representations of themselves, and of dominant culture Canadians, often take into account the white majority's stereotypical notions of them as they attempt to resist those depictions in their own heterogeneous

representations of Chinese Canadian identities.⁶ Thus, their own inscriptions of self are intertextually linked to those of the long list of writers in the Western literary tradition who have provided readers with one-dimensional portrayals of the Chinese. At the same time their stories are intertwined with tales from the Chinese literary tradition. Jing Wang (1992) explains, in her analysis of classical Chinese works such as *The Journey to the West and Dream of the Red Chamber*, how intertextuality has been a feature of Chinese literary aesthetics for centuries:

Although the concept of intertextuality emerges as a post-structuralist idiom in the West, it is a universal phenomenon that defines the communicative relationships between one text and another, and, particularly in the case of age-old writing traditions, between a text and its context ... For the ancient Chinese literati, the autonomy of text is indeed an alien concept. That no text escapes the confinement of its age-old literary tradition is a truism so familiar to traditional critics that a notion such as "intertextual relationship" has long been taken for granted and needs little justification. (2-3)

When, in *Many-Mouthed Birds*, Denise Chong tells the story of her concubine grandmother, Chung Gim-ching, in the anthology's excerpt from her autobiography, *The Concubine's Children*, just as Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan found themselves exorcizing family ghosts in the process of speaking out about their racial heritage, so Chong listens carefully to the ghost of her grandmother in order to tell her family's story. But, unlike the stereotypical representations of "lotus blossom babies" and "dragon ladies" which Renee Tajima and Jonathan Spence have identified in dominant culture depictions of Chinese women, Chong portrays her grandmother as a complicated human being whose acts can be viewed simultaneously as noble, selfish, disturbing, and justified.

Although Chong knew her grandmother before she died in a car accident at age fifty-eight in 1967, Denise's childhood memories of her were anything but pleasant. In fact, the principal characteristics of her grandmother which she recalls from those days were her tuberculosis and drunkenness. She says of Chung Gim-ching that "I preferred Grandmother's silent beauty in the photographs; in real life, she had scared me" (60). But as Chong delved into the history of her Grandmother's life in Canada she came to recognize that this remarkable woman had suffered much for her children and grandchildren in both Canada and China. When Chung Gim-ching came to Canada in 1924 (one year after the establishment of the Exclusion Act) she was actually a seventeen-year-old girl named Leon May-ying. She had been purchased by Denise Chong's grandfather to be his concubine in Canada, but, because the Chinese were no longer allowed to enter the country, she cut her hair to look older in order to conform to the appearance of the twenty-four-year-old Chinese Canadian, Chung Gim-ching, whose birth certificate Chong's grandfather had illegally bought and sent to her.

During the next five years, so that she would not consider running away from her husband, he kept a hunting knife under his side of the mattress. Then, in 1929, after giving birth to two daughters, Chung Gim-ching moved back to China for two years to live under the same roof with her husband's legitimate wife. Chong states that "for two years in China, havoc reigned as grandfather tried to keep his

two wives under one roof" (63). But in 1930, after a blind soothsayer incorrectly predicted that the then-pregnant Chung Gim-ching would give birth to a boy, the couple returned to Canada to give their "son" the chance of a better life and left their two daughters in China with Wife Number One. Denise Chong's mother was born a few months later in Vancouver's Chinatown. In the long years of separation which followed, Chong's Grandmother and Grandfather worked hard to earn money to send back to their family in China, even though, after the 1949 Revolution, they were not sure whether or not the money was actually getting through to their daughters. The money which was sent before the Communists took power was used to build a huge house for the family, but after the Communists gained control of the region the family members were labelled "black elements" and all of their wealth was redistributed. "Grandfather's land was organized into a village cooperative. The 'unsightly' opulence of his house was remedied" (72).

Even though Chung Gim-ching eventually left her husband, taking Denise's mother with her to raise on her own, both she and Denise's Grandfather continued throughout the rest of their lives to place the needs of their family in China ahead of their own needs. This caused great hardships for Denise's mother as she was growing up in Canada, so much so that she could not feel any love for either of them while they were alive. Nevertheless, finally, in 1987, when she was at last able to visit her relatives in China and to see that not only had her parents raised her to be a prosperous Canadian, but that they had also done their best to provide for their family in China, Denise's mother felt genuine gratitude toward her mother and father.

In the two excerpts from Sky Lee's novel, *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, which are included in *Many-Mouthed Birds*, another young woman from China, Fong Mei, is brought to Canada in 1924 to be the wife of an elderly businessman. But in her case within a year she falls in love with a young man, Ting An, who is an apprentice to her husband, and they have an affair. What makes the plight of this teenager in Vancouver's Chinatown in 1925 so gripping for adolescent readers is the fact that she is attempting to escape from the domination of her husband, Gwei Chang, and mother-in-law, Mui Lan, even though everything in her life to this point tells her that she should remain submissive to their will. Without her husband she will become a penniless outcast from her community losing all of her rights in both Canada and China. Yet, ironically, her mother-in-law will have to treat her with more respect if she gives birth as a result of her liaison. Fong Mei's boyfriend, A Ting, understands all of this when he thinks about her predicament before he realizes that she loves him:

The source of her troubles was obvious to him. She was squashed under her mother-in-law's big thumb. And that old bag would have a sadistic knack of making life miserable for a daughter-in-law. If only Fong Mei had one baby, her problems would be over; she'd be able to tell Mui Lan off. That's the way with mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. What could Mui Lan do then—throw her own grandson out? (113)

Another interesting feature of the relationship between A Ting and Fong Mei is that A Ting's mother was a Native woman, and so, from an early age, he felt like

an outsider in the Chinese community. Fong Mei's love for him is thus doubly courageous.

Evelyn Lau, whose autobiography, *Runaway*, about her experiences as a teenage prostitute in Vancouver, was made into a powerful television movie, has contributed the story, "Glass," to *Many-Mouthed Birds*. It is a deeply disturbing tale about a suicidal woman who contemplates with chilling detachment "committing death" after she has been rejected by her lover. "Perhaps he too craved only things beyond his reach, and despised her for giving herself to him" (45). In another story about the problems of illicit love, Anne Jew's "Everyone Talked Loudly In Chinatown," the narrator describes the night she was caught in the headlights of her parents' car as she kissed her boyfriend, Todd, goodnight. When she finally enters the house her mother screams at her, "How can you be so fearless! Going out with a white boy!" Then, when her father walks up to her and slaps her in the face, without thinking she immediately slaps him back.

Certainly none of these women are the stereotypical "Lotus Blossom Babies" who have traditionally been found in Eurocentric fiction. Their actions are clear evidence that they are determined to control their own destinies (even if the results of their resolve are tragic), and that they refuse to be confined within other people's narrow definitions of them. Xin-hua, in *Forbidden City*, (like these women and like the warriors in Kingston's novel) also bravely attempts to fashion for herself a new identity against all the power of the Chinese government and army. But to appreciate the depth and complexity of Xin-hua's courage young readers need to be given the chance to see the world through her eyes. That is why the fiction of writers such as Kingston, Tan, Chong, Lee, Lau, and Jew must be read, so that it can provide the necessary points of comparison with which young readers can move intertextually between Eurocentric and postcolonial representations of Chinese women.

NOTES

- 1 For the term "culture," Said designates two definitions in particular. First, culture "means all those practices, like the arts of description, communication, and representation, that have relative autonomy from the economic, social, and political realms" (*Culture* xii). He points out, for example, that novels such as *Robinson Crusoe*, while valued principally as aesthetic objects which produce pleasure in their readers, are also very "important in the formation of imperial attitudes, references, and experiences." Said's second definition of culture is derived from Matthew Arnold's. It is "a concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society's reservoir of the best that has been known and thought" (xii).
- 2 Said's notion of a comparative literature of imperialism is not to be confused with traditional Western comparative literary critical approaches. As he points out about traditional comparative criticism, "Academic work in comparative literature carried with it the notion that Europe and the United States together were the center of the world, not simply by virtue of their political positions, but also because their literatures were the ones most worth studying" (*Culture* 46).
- 3 Among the examples of stereotypes of Asian women deconstructed by Tajima is the following: "In 1985 director Michael Cimino cloned Suzie Wong to TV news anchor Connie Chung and created another anchor, Tracy Tzu (Ariane), in the disastrous exploitation film *Year of the Dragon*. In it Tzu is ostensibly the only positive Asian American character in a film that villifies

- the people of New York's Chinatown. The Tzu character is a success in spite of her ethnicity. Just as she would rather eat Italian than Chinese, she'd rather sleep with white men than Chinese men. (She is ultimately raped by three "Chinese boys.") Neither does she bat an eye at the barrage of racial slurs fired off by her lover, lead Stanley White, the Vietnam vet and New York City cop played by Mickey Rourke" (*Waves* 313).
- 4 Lisa Lowe, however, points out that Frank Chin accuses Kingston of having "exoticized Chinese-American culture; he argues that she has 'feminized' Asian American literature and undermined the power of Asian American men to combat the racist stereotypes of the dominant white culture. Kingston and other woman novelists such as Amy Tan, he says, misrepresent Chinese history in order to exaggerate its patriarchal structure; as a result, Chinese society is portrayed as being even more misogynistic than European society" (33). Lowe, however, counters the attacks of Chin by arguing that from the perspective of Asian American feminists the attempts of nationalists to construct an essentialized native Asian-American subject only serve to obscure gender issues. From her postcolonial feminist position Lowe believes that the desire to essentialize Chinese-American identity fails to recognize the condition of heterogeneous differences which has been so effectively represented in Kingston's novel (34).
 - 5 For those who are interested in sampling other anthologies of Chinese fiction written in English a good place to start is to read the following excellent anthologies. For a collection of stories from the Chinese-American community, for instance, I recommend *Aiiieeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* (1991) edited by Frank Chin, *et al.* For a selection of short stories and novellas from the People's Republic, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, Michael S. Duke's anthology, *Worlds of Modern Chinese Fiction* (1991) is a wonderful text. And for a collection of stories about the Chinese diaspora in the Asian Pacific I recommend Trevor Carolan's anthology, *The Colors of Heaven: Short Stories from the Pacific Rim* (1992).
 - 6 Alice Chen, a social worker in Vancouver's Chinatown, rejects racist discourse in Canadian society at large by deconstructing the assumptions underlying stereotypical representations of people of colour: "I do not know kungfu. Sweet and sour pork is not my favourite dish. My family does not operate a grocery store or laundromat. I do not drive a Mercedes; nor do I own a cellular phone. Furthermore, I do not know how to please men. All the above are true, despite the fact that I am Chinese and I come from Hong Kong ... I dream of a society where people can be recognized for who they are and not which group they belong to. I dream of a society where friends and acquaintances will take time to know me, instead of making assumptions about me" (*Vancouver Sun*, Saturday, May 25, 1991).

WORKS CITED

- Bell, William. *Forbidden City: A Novel*. Toronto: Doubleday Canada Ltd., 1990.
- Bolaria, B.S., and P. Li, eds. *Racial Oppression in Canada*. Toronto: Garamond Press, 1988.
- Carolan, Trevor, ed. *The Colors of Heaven: Short Stories from the Pacific Rim*. Toronto: Random House, 1992.
- Chen, Alice. *The Vancouver Sun* Saturday, May 25, 1991.
- Chin, F., P.J. Chan, L.F. Inada, and S. Wong. *Aiiieeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers*. New York: Mentor, 1991.
- Clavell, James. *Tai-Pan: A Novel of Hong Kong*. New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1966.
- Duke, Michael. *Worlds of Modern Chinese Fiction: Short Stories and Novellas from the People's Republic, Taiwan, and Hong Kong*. London: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1991.
- Hesse, Jurgen. *Voices of Change: Immigrant Writers Speak Out*. Vancouver: Pulp Press, 1990.
- Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. New York: Random House, 1976.
- Lee, Bennett, and Jim Wong-Chu, eds. *Many-Mouthed Birds: Contemporary Writing by Chinese Canadians*. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1991.
- Lee, Sky. *Disappearing Moon Cafe*. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1990.
- Lau, Evelyn. *Runaway: Diary of a Streetkid*. Toronto: Harper & Collins, 1989.
- Lim, Shirley Geok-lin. "Twelve Asian American Writers: In Search of Self-Definition." *Redefining*

- American Literary History*. Eds. A.L.B. Ruoff & J.W. Ward. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1990.
- Lowe, Lisa. "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian-American Differences." *Diaspora* 1.1 (1991): 24-44.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Random House, 1978.
- Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Knopf, 1993.
- Spence, Jonathan. "Chinese Fictions in the Twentieth Century." *Asia in Western Fiction*. Eds. R.W. Winks & J.R. Rush. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990.
- Tajima, Renee. "Lotus blossoms don't bleed." *Making Waves: An Anthology of Writings By and About Asian American Women*. Eds. Asian Women United of California. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989. 308-317.
- Tan, Amy. *The Joy Luck Club*. New York: Ivy Books, 1989.
- Wang, Jing. *The Story of Stone: Intertextuality, Ancient Chinese Stone Lore, and the Stone Symbolism of Dream of the Red Chamber, Water Margin, and the Journey to the West*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1992.
- Wang, Veronica. "Reality and Fantasy: The Chinese-American Woman's Quest for Identity." *MELUS* 12.3 (1985): 23-31.
- Wong, Sauling Cynthia. "Necessity and Extravagance in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*: Art and the ethnic experience." *MELUS* 15.1 (1988): 3-26.

James C. Greenlaw is an Assistant Professor at the University of Regina where he teaches a course in Young Adult Literature. He has also taught English in China. He has written elsewhere about the importance of postcolonial literary theory for the high school multicultural literature curriculum.

VideoLit

Has your department ever needed:

- material for a substitute instructor
- guidance for a teaching assistant
- a focus for independent study?

Then it needed VideoLit.

VideoLit is a series of video lectures on English literature, combining period art and music with location videography to put your students into the historical and social contexts of such authors as Chaucer, Donne, Pope, Wordsworth, and Brontë.

To save preparation time and work, each video comes with its own instructor's guide full of suggestions and study questions that build on the presentation of the video, and this provides your instructors with almost instant expertise on the work in question.

For a complimentary catalogue on VideoLit, write to:

VideoLit
 Department of English, University of Guelph
 Guelph, Ontario Canada N1G 2W1
 fax (519) 766-0844, or email celeste@uoguelph.ca.

Let VideoLit help your department fill those needs.