Identity Development and Cultural Production in the Chinese Diaspora to the United States, 1850-2004: New Perspectives

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By David Pendery

Introduction

The conditions that diaspora populations live in around the world, and the challenges they face in adapting to new cultures, have become increasingly important social questions at the dawn of the 21st century. Previous conceptions of diaspora populations—groups of immigrants, sojourners, slaves, or strangers living in newlands, while retaining strong attachments to their homelands—still apply, but as world travel and relocation have become more common, the numbers of those seeking exile or new beginnings in newlands have increased, globalization has created new classes of diaspora based on economic motivations, and technology and modern communication have linked people worldwide and made virtual diasporas and identities readily possible, the number of diasporic communities and individuals has exploded, necessitating an almost urgent need for redefinition and understanding of the diaspora experience. Amidst such ferment, the theoretical framework of diaspora individuals and communities is being renovated and expanded to better accord with the experiences of modern diasporic peoples. Given these new conditions, we can in fact ask ourselves whether—in a teeming world of nomadic individuals and communities from everywhere living and/or interacting everywhere—the concept of diaspora has become the most accurate overall description of present cultural relations and human situational practices.

In this paper I will examine change and development in Chinese diaspora populations in the United States,1 which have encountered the entire range of diaspora experience, old and new, from 1850 to the present day. My aim is threefold: 1) to comparatively sketch new ideas in diaspora studies, add to them where I can, and employ them in an analysis of individual and community identity construction in the Chinese diaspora, while comparing and contrasting these experiences with those of the Jewish and black diasporas; 2) to present a four-stage model of diasporic literary production and attendant personal and community identity construction, through which I will examine varied examples of Chinese American writing; and 3) to present a four-stage model of diasporic literary production and attendant personal and community identity construction, through which I will examine varied examples of Chinese American writing; and 3) within this model, to give extended attention to Chinese American writer Maxine Hong Kingston’s China Men (1980), a pivotal text defining and describing Chinese American diaspora identity and experience in the United States.2 I shall conclude with a look forward, and thoughts about possible new conditions modifying “new diasporas.”

1 This paper will focus on the Chinese diaspora to the United States, although Chinese people have relocated to many other countries, and Chinese immigration throughout southeast Asia is currently of particular interest to many researchers.
2 Note that I will sometimes include Chinese diaspora subjects within the larger context of Asian American culture in the United States.
1. Diasporas then and now

Diaspora studies, in various guises, has a long history, with various strands of meaning linking impacted communities. “Classic” views of diaspora—loss of an “original center” and yearning desire for return and renovation of the homeland (the Jewish diaspora), forced mass diasporas (the black African experience during the slavery era), diaspora stemming from centuries of conquest by foreign powers, dispersing a people into areas mostly near their homelands (the Armenian diaspora), or volatile areas of heavy migration along frontiers of coterminous peoples and cultures (such as the North American experience in Canada, the United States and Mexico)—are still viable, but are seen as increasingly insufficient in today’s world, where new cultural, economic, technological, and migration and settlement conditions have created a dizzying variety of diasporic peoples and experiences. Some diasporas are constituted of people driven from their ancestral lands (exiles and refugees pushed away), while some are made up of people willingly seeking a more comfortable existence (immigrants pulled toward). Once they have established themselves in their newlands (always a difficult transition), the comfort level that diaspora populations experience ranges from the blandly at ease—those happy to assimilate into new nations and cultures—to those who experience virulent racism and discrimination, forcing them into frustration, anger, loss and even militancy. Others pride a balanced identity that combines the best of two worlds—the hyphenated-American, the Islamic French, the Arab Jew, or a comfortable expatriate in any land, not quite leaving her old home, and not quite taking root in her new one. Finally, a variety of technologies has not only brought the world’s peoples closer together, but also made virtual diaspora experiences a way of life—BLOGs, electronic bulletin boards and newsgroups sharing information and activism worldwide; email; online dating and sex; gaming and role-playing networks that span continents; and e-learning and vast amounts of information available on the Internet about countries and cultures (not to mention tried-and-true blast-fax communications, telephones, cable and satellite TV, and snail-mail).

In various ways, all of the above groups struggle to “mediate, in a lived tension the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place” (Clifford 255). It is this variety of entanglements that has necessitated more comprehensive conceptions of what now constitutes and conditions the challenges of individual and community identity construction in diasporic peoples. Below I will review the work of three analysts who have studied modern diaspora issues: William Safran, Paul Gilroy and James Clifford. While I will refer to others in this paper, I shall rely primarily on these three analysts’ concepts.

A good starting point is Safran’s definition of diaspora. First published in his 1991 “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return,” in the journal Diaspora, Safran’s definition is appealingly straightforward and comprehensive, with diaspora communities defined as expatriate communities that—

- are dispersed from an original “center” to at least two “peripheral” places;
- maintain a “memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland;”
- believe they cannot or will not be accepted into their new homes;
The variety of different peoples who have lived in a variety of different diasporas tend to loosen up an integrated model like this one (see Clifford 247-250), but Safran’s description is, I feel, still applicable, and echoes of it can be heard in even the most expansive or deconstructive notions of diaspora. I have referred to James Clifford, whose Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late 20th Century will provide this paper with many helpful perspectives on modern diaspora culture and community. Clifford gently chides Safran when he writes that diasporas are now defined less by a center/periphery model, and instead comprise personal and cultural interplay in a “sprawling social world...linked through cultural forms, kinship relations, business circuits, and travel trajectories” (248) that ultimately become “distinct versions of modern, transnational, intercultural experience” (qtd. in Ang 290). As well as anyone, Clifford has found that “the old conceptions of international migration are simply incapable of capturing the essence of the rapidly changing nature of global migration” (Ma 4), and his ideas often accord with the Chinese diaspora experience.

The final analyst I shall refer to at length is Paul Gilroy, whose important book The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness (1993) in some senses prefigured Clifford by examining the “rhizomorphic, fractal structure” of the black diaspora experience that spanned Africa, the Americas and Britain during and after slavery (Gilroy 4). One of Gilroy’s central themes (from W.E.B. Du Bois) is that of a “double consciousness” stemming from the divided and sometimes broken loyalties of black diaspora subjects during their experiences, which long complicated black community and individual identity development. Gilroy describes this term in various ways—it is sometimes a conception of blacks living “in an expanded West, but not completely of it” (58), sometimes a dual view of “an American, a Negro...two warring ideas” (126), and sometimes a “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (134), but it nevertheless neatly echoes the Chinese American diaspora experience, as we shall see below.

2. Different strokes for different folks: varied diaspora inputs and outputs

In this section I will examine selected qualities and conditions of the Chinese, Jewish and black diasporas. Of necessity I must be somewhat broad, but we shall see that distilling the experiences of diaspora populations can be revealing, enabling fruitful comparisons and contrasts that can aid understanding the elements and experiences of diaspora populations, highlighting key similarities and differences, allowing for significant feedback loops of meaning, and facilitating forward collations to see how diaspora populations have changed and developed (and how they have stayed the same). Table 1 below attempts to provide a relatively complete, correlative look at characters of ethnicity, history, race, culture and identity of the

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3 From Clifford 247.
Chinese, Jewish and black diasporas, and encapsulate the transnational, intercultural “mix of destruction, adaptation, preservation, and creation” of diaspora experience (Clifford 265). Note that the labels and interpretations are loosely based on the initial experiences of these groups in the United States and elsewhere—with some extending to the present day, but others having been rectified or modified over time.

**Table 1: Identity, Nation, Rights and Race in the Chinese, Jewish and Black Diasporas**

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<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Jewish</th>
<th>Black</th>
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<tr>
<td>Diaspora identity</td>
<td>Sojourners</td>
<td>Displaced people</td>
<td>Slaves</td>
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<tr>
<td>Homeland identity</td>
<td>Nationalistic-mythic</td>
<td>Autochthonous</td>
<td>Mythic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial newland</td>
<td>Aliens</td>
<td>Strangers</td>
<td>Subalterns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>identity</td>
<td>Racial discrimination, citizenship curtailed, equal rights substantially delayed</td>
<td>Limited racial difference, citizenship and equal rights gradually obtained</td>
<td>Racial discrimination, citizenship obtained, equal rights gradually obtained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emancipation,</td>
<td>Deferred</td>
<td>Dynamic</td>
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<td>autonomy in newland</td>
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The conception of the Chinese “sojourner” is now well-established. The reason for this is that, different from the Jews as a violently displaced people, and blacks as a stolen people (bondsmen), many Chinese people immigrating to the United States from the mid-1800s came somewhat voluntarily, with plans to return to their families. Ronald Takaki writes, “They went as wah gung (華工), Chinese laborers, as sojourners hopeful they would be able to work in a foreign country and return home rich in three to five years” (31; Chinese added). However, although Chinese sojourners were “overblown with hope” (Takaki 21) during their initial immigration, their hopes were quickly dashed. A fact that many people are unaware of is that the Chinese diaspora experience in its early years bore similarities to that of black slaves at approximately the same time. Takaki writes that many Chinese sojourners were taken to Cuba and South America as indentured servants and “unfree laborers” (36), while working conditions in the United States were so harsh that a New England businessman reported to his employers that “slavery [was] nothing” compared to the experiences of Chinese workers on sugar cane plantations in Hawaii (Takaki 21). During the first 20 years of Chinese immigration, when Chinese men were mostly employed in rural and labor jobs, in mines or during construction of the U.S. transnational railroad, Chinese workers were ruthlessly exploited. Further, Chinese people in the United States were subject to a terrible series of restrictive, discriminatory laws that read something like anti-black laws in the years before and after the Civil War, limiting their ability to enter the country, hold jobs, get educations, own homes, and build their families. In these respects, the experience of Chinese people mirrors that of blacks, and they saw their social status in the United States reduced to that of the subaltern—“He was a slave; I was a
slave,” says Maxine Hong Kingston’s mother of she and her husband about their lives in America (Hong Kingston 244), while Robert Lee writes of the treatment of Chinese as “a degraded and servile work force” in the United States in the 19th century (qtd. in Eperjesi 134).

In another parallel to the black diaspora experience, the “Pacific passage” of Chinese sojourners was eerily similar to the Middle Passage of black slaves during the slavery era. The grim brutality of the black experience was much more severe, but Takaki writes that Chinese diaspora subjects traveling across the Pacific in the 19th century, “were packed together...the smell of freight, oil, and machines filled the air of the stifling steerage...the food terrible and monotonous” (68), while Maxine Hong Kingston relates that her great grandfather was “locked belowdecks” where “the beds looked like stacks of coffins in a death house” (93-94). A Chinese immigrant from Xiangshan (香山) wrote on the walls of the detention center on Angel Island in San Francisco Bay in the early 20th century that “Everyone says traveling to North America is a pleasure / I suffered misery on the ship...” (Lai 38). Paul Gilroy identifies the sailing ship as the defining diasporic symbol of the “Black Atlantic,” with uprooted, mobile, tightly linked communities in the process of a triangulated relocation and exile. Gilroy writes that “The image of the ship—a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion” (4) effectively captures the transnationality and intercultural relations, the exchange of ideas and activism, and the movement of cultural and political artifacts, as experienced by the black diaspora. This image parallels the Chinese diaspora experience to the United States. There are of course differences, but Takaki writes that “the surging, swirling ocean around them seemed to emblematize their feelings...they were in movement, with nothing solid and stable beneath them” (70). Such motility subsequently transmitted a variety of cultural and political experience, creating a “Chinese Pacific” that mirrors the cultural ground that Gilroy calls the Black Atlantic.

The Chinese experience of the hard journey across an ocean to a newland followed by brutal, exploitative working environments, links the Chinese and black diasporas in their time, and would similarly make individual, filial and community identity construction difficult for decades after. These conditions, past and present, are generally different from that of the Jewish diaspora, and that they continue to this day indicates that they are an enduring element of the diaspora experience.

Above we have seen similarities in some of the diasporic experiences of the diasporic groups we are examining, but in terms of the importance, character and status of their homelands, as well as their teleologies of return, these three populations are dramatically different. The Jews, widely dispersed (mostly over Europe), for some thousands of years viewed their homeland as autochthonous, constituting their destiny as a people, and which they intended to recreate in its original place and conception. This nativist view never truly diminished (in fact, it grew), for many Jewish people, until they realized their dream in 1948, and to the present. In a word, the Jewish teleology of return to their homeland was dynamic, a

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4 Even today Chinese migrants brave dangerous conditions on illegal ships, trucks or trains seeking opportunities in newlands in their quest for better conditions. See “Illegal entry into U.S. has a long, dangerous history,” by Robert L. Jamieson Jr., Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 11 January 2000.
plan in progress with stated aims of achievement, even if that achievement required much time and the use of force.

Blacks who were forcefully removed from Africa came from a much more fragmented homeland tradition, with the concept of a “nation state” all but unknown to them, although as peoples they were certainly aware of the essential ideas of homeland(s) “original center(s),” nation(s) or, on a smaller scale, tribe(s). Any such ideas of national and tribal unity, however, were almost completely shattered when they were relocated to the United States and elsewhere during the slavery era. Thus the concept of an “original center” was lost, and the teleology of return for the black diaspora populations would only emerge later, decentered, in various guises: as newly created countries in Africa visualized as black homelands (i.e. Liberia); as a desire to return to countries in which they had established homes, in Africa, the Caribbean, America, or Europe; or the idea of a “mythic” Africa, a vast area that collapsed varied homeland identities into something of a singular racial identity. Chinese diasporic subjects, have never had to face the scale of challenge to their homeland identity and teleology of return that Jews and blacks have. Chinese diaspora subjects are unique in that they have always had a clearly defined, whole and existent nation to relate their diaspora experiences to, and to cultivate as a homeland to return to or more broadly, as Safran notes, to commit to the “maintenance and restoration” of (from Clifford 247). Ang writes that “the notion of a single center, or cultural core, from which Chinese civilization has emanated—the so-called Central Country complex—[is] deeply entrenched in the Chinese historical imagination” (286). In short, there was never for Chinese immigrants any true threat of loss of their homeland and neither was there a requirement to recreate a homeland, although they may have felt something akin to these motivations at various times, because of political conditions in China. Thus, the Chinese teleology of return was only deferred—either in that the Chinese sojourners fully intended to return to home and family in a few years (and were largely capable of doing so), or in that if a return was delayed because of political conditions, these would likely be temporary, and return would be realizable in the future.

Given this strong, viable homeland, there may have been something of a Chinese version of “double consciousness,” in one respect similar to W.E.B. DuBois’s conception of black double consciousness, but in another quite different. In the 1970s, activist Asian American writers Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan wrote of a “dual personality” in Asian Americans, through which Asian Americans were subject to an “utter lack of cultural distinction, the destruction of an organic sense of identity...complete psychological and cultural subjugation” (Li 25). Such conditions were created through manipulation of overt and covert discourse in America, ultimately aimed at the creation of an Asian “other” as a foil on which the hegemonic culture could project or displace its worst qualities, strengthen discrimination and feelings of dislocation in Asian diaspora communities, enforce a...
sort of forced assimilation, and reinscribe the histories of diaspora subjects in hegemonic terms.6

Another, more positive, interpretation of Chinese divided consciousness saw the Chinese attachment to their existent homeland competing with or complementing the desire for citizenship in their newland. This idea can be understood in a relatively constructive sense, in terms of Chinese immigrants’ new citizenship aims in the United States (to be examined below), as well as when seen in light of processes of Chinese American assimilation and cultural appropriation in the 1960s and 70s (to be examined in Section 3).

In addition to the above qualities, the Chinese national and cultural consciousness includes a well-developed mythical current. In terms of nation, although not quite the magnitude of a “mythic” nation like Africa, we do see a mythological conception in Chinese thought, such as in the Chinese world for “China” (中國), which means “middle kingdom,” and which stems from a Chinese creation myth that situates China—a realm created by heavenly gods—in a transcendent space between heaven and earth.7 We might alternatively link the “mythic” Africa to the mythology of China in that each is a totalizing description of an oracular world (a people, a nation) which, although a bit faded over time, still retains political importance. However, I feel that the Chinese national mythology differs from this, in that it exists much more completely as an existent body of literature and thought that substantially predates the conception of a totalized, mythic Africa. Further, the pantheon of Chinese mythology has a legendary cast of characters playing roles in a grand narrative of cultural development, and to this day Chinese youth study these stories as central elements of their national consciousness. These different attachments and ongoing commitments have given Chinese diaspora subjects a rich vein of discursive support, and a feeling of permanence that has strengthened their ability to adapt and survive in their newlands. While some might relate the Chinese focus on mythological aspects of a national story to that of the Jews—by way of the Jew’s great religious writings—I am more inclined to see the Chinese conception of national mythology as a cultural construct based on ancient thought with an essentially educative function in society.

I will not address in depth the range of sociological, biological or cultural questions of race in this paper, but because views of race have strongly impacted the status and treatment of diaspora peoples, the following questions will be considered: To what extent is race seen as a central cultural concept, and to what extent are its qualities either constructive or harmful in diasporic populations? In the following, I will loosely adhere to a three-race model that reflects a handful of physical differences among some peoples of the world—Caucasian, Negroid (black) and Mongoloid (Asian). Such terminology may appear dated to some, but is not meant to be offensive, and in any case it is precisely these groups that have been commonly classified along discriminatory racial lines in American history. In any case, in the following I will work from the understanding that “the fact that race is

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6 I shall further discuss conceptions of the “other,” in light of the Chinese American diaspora, in Section 3 and in the conclusion of this paper.

7 This is a simplification of Chinese founding mythology, but is one accepted interpretation. See Schwartz for a trenchant study of Chinese mythology and thought.
not a valid scientific category does not undermine its symbolic and social

effectuality” (Stuart Hall qtd. in Ang 284).

The question of the “Jewish race” is perhaps easiest to address. The Jews have been
identified, and have identified themselves, as a race, though not, I think, on the
scale that Chinese and black people have. In most respects the idea of a Jewish
“race” is not based on any scientific definitions, and is instead a cultural construct (a
people, a nation), as well as a result of Jews’ difference and separatism from other
peoples in the Middle East. The Jewish culture may be unique, but as a “race” most
Jewish people are viewed as Caucasian, which has long enabled most Jews to live in
majority-white communities in Europe and the United States with little or no notable
racial difference. In my view, rather than any seriously influential racial
classification, Jewish diasporic subjects have been viewed very broadly as Simmel-
esque merchant “strangers” within their communities in their newlands. Simply put,
rather than extreme views of the Chinese “alien” or the black “subaltern,” diasporic
Jews were often seen as “an element of the group itself” in the communities in
which they lived (Simmel 145), and found, as described by Simmel, the stranger’s
unique combination of advantages and disadvantages in a newland. For Simmel,
strangers are not necessarily spurned by their new communities, and their roles as
merchants “[make] possible unlimited combinations, and through [trade],
intelligence is constantly extended and applied in new areas” (144). Further,
“because [the stranger] is not bound by roots to the particular constituents and
partisan dispositions of the group, he confronts all of these with a distinctly
‘objective’ attitude,” which “can…be defined as freedom” (Simmel 145, 146). Of
course there are differences within the Jewish diaspora, and Simmel broadens his
analysis beyond the fact that “the stranger makes his appearance everywhere as a
trader” (143) to generally include those of “alien origin,” and anyone who “comes
today and stays tomorrow” in a newland (148, 143). But given the general
conception of Caucasian, cosmopolitan Jewish diaspora subjects who have often
lived as “organic member[s] of the group” (Simmel 149), Jews have not had to live
with the more obvious racial differences that Chinese and black diaspora subjects
have had to.

Black experiences based on race in the United States and elsewhere is well known,
and is not needed here. I have assigned the status of “subaltern” to black identity in
the societies they lived in during and after the slavery era, a reflection of the
treatment blacks received based on their racial qualities. The meaning of this term
is, I believe, self-evident in terms of black diaspora experience and concomitant
individual and community identity construction (of course the current black status
and experience in most nations is substantially improved).

The conception of “Chinese” as a race has long been embraced by Chinese people
and others, and there has been over time, or at times, a racial quality to the
Chinese diaspora. One facet of this idea is the almost innate notion of “Chinese-
ness,” called by Ien Ang a “primordial interpellation of belonging to the largest race
of the world, the ‘family’ of ‘the Chinese people’” (297). This racial conception is
false, however, and like the Jewish people, the existence of an independent Chinese
“race” stems from strong cultural and national histories and practices, rather than
any racial classifications. Nevertheless, although there may be no discrete Chinese
race, without question diasporic Chinese subjects were racially discriminated against
in the United States and this seriously impacted their communities. Early Chinese
immigrants were derisively called “celestials,” “nagurs,” “Orientals,” and “heathen Chinese” in the 19th century and were “associated with blacks in the racial imagination of white society” (Takaki 100). While they may have suffered slightly (only slightly) less of the wholesale discrimination that blacks were subject to in the late 19th to mid 20th centuries, they looked different from the Caucasians they lived with in the United States, and thus they did not “blend in” in the way (mostly) Caucasian Jewish people did, and ultimately suffered negative consequences and discrimination similar to black people.

While similar in many ways, in one facet of their newland national experience, black and Chinese people were treated very differently, which had a significantly different impact on their individual and community identity construction. This was the two groups’ chances of achieving constructive citizenship in the United States. It is interesting to note that in spite of the discrimination that black people suffered, they were generally viewed as citizens of the country (or at least potential citizens, which would become wholly possible after the Civil War). Of course this is a complex issue, and the citizenship they were granted was full of conditions—but citizens they were, and for all the discrimination and degradation they suffered, they were destined (if I may use that word) to become integrated into American society. Even before the Civil War, Frederick Douglass and a small number of other blacks had achieved notable prominence, and a number of other black people achieved important positions in politics, business, academia and the arts as the 19th century wore on, which is to say nothing of the ordinary sight of black people walking the streets, working in businesses, attending schools, and steadily (if haltingly) integrating. During this same time, however, few Chinese people achieved much of any kind of acknowledgement, let alone prominence or—most importantly—citizenship and equal rights in the United States. Thus, in many ways, the fundamental struggles for emancipation, autonomy, and citizenship were even more difficult for Chinese in the United States than they were for blacks, and certainly for Jews. Although California Governor James McDougal announced in 1852 that Chinese immigrants were “one of the most worthy classes of our newly adopted citizens” (Takaki 81), the reality was wholly different. Not only were the sojourners subject to ruthless discrimination, a series of laws steadily limited their rights and freedom. The 1870 Nationality Act allowed white people and “African aliens” to apply for naturalization, while Chinese people were excluded. Section 14 of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act states that, “no State court or court of the United States shall admit Chinese to citizenship.” In effect, Chinese people were viewed as not only of alien origin, but as permanent aliens—“immediate or present yet [with] a foreign nature or allegiance” (Lee 3)—in a way that blacks were not.  

8 Takaki posits a change in that Chinese sojourners began to be seen as Simmel-esque “merchant strangers” by the late 1800s. My own position is that the perception of Chinese as alien to Western culture and values extends across the sojourner/stranger transition, and has remained prevalent well into the middle of the 20th century and beyond (see Li, Imagining, Introduction). Nevertheless, Takaki’s thesis is important to note and is one instance of adaptation and the development of new identity within a diaspora community. With Chinese immigration limited by the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act to a trickle of qualified merchants, and as Chinese in the United States began to move from the rural laborer occupations into urban areas, establishing social and occupational “colonies” (Chinatowns) in various American cities, Chinese people began to be seen as industrious small
discrimination continued into the 20th century, and numerous poems written by Chinese sojourners detained at the Angel Island Immigration station in San Francisco Bay at this time refer to their lack of rights, one asking “why am I imprisoned without guilt of crime?” (奈何無罪入囚途?) (Lai 154), and another writing, “America has power, but not justice” (美有強權無公理) (Lai 58).

For many Chinese diaspora subjects, citizenship and minimum legal rights and recognition were critical elements of their identity aims in the newland, but except for a small number who managed to obtain at least minimal rights, such an outcome was delayed or curtailed until a much later date than even black Americans. It would not be until 1943, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt appealed to the United States congress to “correct a historic mistake,” that the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed, allowing full naturalization and citizenship rights for Chinese Americans.

The above describes a varied, interrelated set of factors that highlight the Chinese diaspora’s similarities to and differences from other diaspora populations, and key factors in individual and community development of the Chinese diaspora in the United States. The Chinese diaspora in the United States has had to balance both constructive and corrosive elements during this process, and gains were won only slowly in political, cultural and economic realms as these individuals and communities gradually developed productive, coherent, full-bodied identities. But change did come, and in the next section I shall present a four-stage model of personal and community identity construction and attendant literary production, into which I will fit elements of the Chinese diaspora experience and examples of Chinese literary production, focusing on Maxine Hong Kingston’s China Men, in order to trace key phases in the developing conceptions of Chinese diaspora identity.

### 3. A four-stage model of Chinese diaspora identity development

As we review this model, it will become clear that there are significant overlaps across the four stages, that conditions and responses from the Chinese diaspora population during one stage may precede or forecast another, and that returns to earlier stages are possible. In short, no truly stable model may be possible, and this is a “potential” framework, yet subject to modification. However, I hope this construct will be useful for categorizing the literary production and development of the Chinese diaspora in the United States, and that it may be applicable to other diaspora populations. Note that I will examine the fourth stage, “post-assimilation,” in this paper’s conclusion.

The four stages of this model of personal and community identity construction and attendant literary production include:

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businesspersons (owning and working in laundries, restaurants, local stores, some small manufacturing, and a modicum of tourism businesses). In a word, Chinese were no longer sojourners—visitors intent on returning home (which is one reason they were viewed as permanent aliens in America)—and they became as Simmel’s merchant strangers. I acknowledge the usefulness and perspicacity of Takaki’s analysis, and the Chinese merchant stranger that began to appear in the Chinese diaspora at this time would ultimately lead, by the 1980s and 1990s, to the development of a vast, cosmopolitan Chinese transnational business, labor and professional network.
1. Plea for recognition
2. Cultural defense
3. Assimilation, appropriation, resistance
4. Post-assimilation

Plea for Recognition

Yu writes that “American orientalism” in the 19th century was “a hegemonic discourse that constructed China as Euro-America’s Other, preventing Chinese American as well as Chinese voices from forming and emerging” (see Yu). As a result, there was a “near absence” of Chinese American discourse during this time (Li, Production 321), and what discourse there was tended to be “condescending toward the customs and practices of the Chinese social system” (Chan 1122). These conditions continued well into the 20th century, and even in the 1960s and 70s, “neither Asian culture nor American culture was equipped to define [Asian Americans] except in the most superficial terms” (Chin and Chan qtd. in Li, Imagining 31). Based on these conditions, this four-stage model begins with works of literature that are pleas for recognition from the suppressed voices of the diaspora community, creating sometimes poignant, sometimes angry, opposition.

Not until fiction and non-fiction works by Winifred and Edith Maude Eaton in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was the above-mentioned discursive absence rectified. Daughters of a Chinese woman and an English man, these sisters sought to convey Asian culture and the lives of Chinese immigrants to white, English-speaking audiences (a tall order at that time, but one that they were somewhat successful in achieving). Winifred Eaton (born in Canada, lived and worked in Canada and the United States) adopted a Japanese pen name, “Onoto Watanna,” in order to mask her identity, but her sister Edith Maude (born in England, lived in Boston, Seattle and San Francisco) took the Romanized Chinese pen name, Sui Sin Far (“water lily” or “narcissus” in English). Far (1865-1914) was something of a radical, and her stories, collected in Mrs. Spring Fragrance (1912), address issues of gender, ethnic identity and cultural hybridity, racism in North America and her own Chinese heritage. In these respects, she is the first major Chinese American writer, the first to “plea for the acceptance of...Chinese in America,” hoping “to effect a change by means of her pen, to be the pioneer in bridging the Occident and the Orient” (see Ling). In her tale “Chan Hen Yen, Chinese Student” (1912), she captures the emotions of Chinese Americans struggling with conflicting allegiances as they forged their new lives:

Oh, China, misguided country!
What would I not sacrifice,
To see thee uphold thyself,
Among the nations,
For bitterer than death, 'tis to know,

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9 David Leiwei Li has identified examples of such discourse in the late 19th century in the United States, with polarized descriptions of Chinese Americans describing a “good” rendition of refined, filial Confucian high culture, and a “bad” version of the “heathen Chinese” (Production 321).
That thou that wert more glorious than all,  
Now lieth as low as the lowest,  
Whilst the feet of those whom thou didst despise,  
Rest insolently upon thy limbs (Far)

Another important example in this stage of Chinese diaspora identity development and literary production is the body of poems written by Chinese sojourners who were detained in strict conditions at the Angel Island Immigration station from 1910 to 1940. These poems, etched or painted on the walls of the facilities, are perhaps the ultimate plea for help from a diaspora people who not only faced severely limited opportunities and harsh discrimination, but also lengthy incarceration in a newland (some were detained for as long as two years). The poems were saved from extinction by a park ranger in the 1970s who discovered them while inspecting the Angel Island buildings before they were to be destroyed. The poems, most undated and unsigned, range from plaintive pleas and farewells, to “defiant wish[es] for China to become powerful enough one day to wreak vengeance on America” (Lai 25). As public pleas for help, they were in vain, but as individual pleas, they “express a vitality and indomitability” (Lai 27) that not only fortified the struggling groups of Chinese immigrants on Angel Island, but also “introduced a new sensibility using China as the source and America as a bridge to spawn a new cultural perspective” (Lai 28). We see here a unique and early instance of Chinese diaspora people crafting a new transnationalism, dealing with their damaged “double consciousness” by simultaneously crafting pleas for understanding, voicing defiance, and constructing “bridges” to link the divided elements of their identities. Below is one Angel Island poem, in Chinese, English and Pinyin.10

10 Chinese in Lai 41, English in Lai 40, Pinyin by the author.

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Instead of remaining a citizen of China, I willingly became an ox.  
I intended to come to America to earn a living.  
The Western styled buildings are lofty; but I have not the luck to live in them.  
How was anyone to know that my dwelling place would be a prison?

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Guo min bu wei gan wei niu,  
Yi zhi mei zhou zuo guan mou.  
Yang lou gao song wu yuan zhu,  
Shei zhi lou suo shi jian lao?
In the second stage of our model, a cultural defense and explanation of the diaspora community’s homeland is launched, enabling more sober and accurate understanding of the alien culture among the newland natives. Although, as noted, little Chinese American literature was seen in the 19th and early 20th centuries, Chinese newspapers of the era in San Francisco, Seattle and Los Angeles did publish material “reflecting the immigrants’ experiences as settlers on a new frontier” (Chan 1120). Chan and Alquiloza write that newspapers in these cities published folk lyrics, popular songs, and Chinese-language materials, and that “such folk expression provides a starting point from which consistent cultural sensibility may be traced” (1120). Such writing constitutes an early example of cultural defense, and combined with pleas for recognition, strengthened the diaspora community as it established itself more securely in the newland.

Although Sui Sin Far was probably the first Chinese American author to take on a focused cultural defense role, it was not until the Harvard-educated Lin Yutang (1895–1976) began to write his academic analyses, memoirs and cultural histories of China that a truly comprehensive and erudite cultural defense of Chinese people was launched from the shores of the United States. His major work, My Country and My People (1935) was genuinely transnational, in that he not only set out to rectify the portrayal of China and the Chinese people as a “stage fiction” to be marveled at by English speaking people, but also to aid the Chinese themselves in “the discovery of their own country” (Lin 11, xi).

Lin’s book is a straightforward, conservative explication of the Chinese people and culture (with a touch of a “plea…for a better understanding” [11]), divided into sections about the ways of life, character, mind and ideals of the Chinese people and culture; their social and political lives; and Chinese arts and philosophy. My Country and My People is imbued with that sometimes-grandiose Chinese view of their homeland as “the greatest mystifying and stupefying fact in the modern world” (4), and their “Chinese blood” as “a mystery of mysteries” (14). If staid in this respect, now out of date, and weighted with a fairly prevalent Western bias (Chan and Alquiloza write that My Country and My People is “devoid of immigrant sensibility” and now “out of favor” [1122]), the book is nevertheless a brilliant comparative work of cultural history, and its popularity in the United States no doubt made an important contribution to the development of the polities, communities and identities of Chinese diaspora populations in the United States, stabilizing and humanizing what had long been cruelly distorted depictions of Chinese people, and helping open the way for the possibility for constructive development and, ultimately, creative exploration of transnational diaspora identity.

Assimilation, appropriation, resistance
By the mid-1960s, long-standing restrictive immigration laws in the United States were finally relaxed, allowing substantially increased immigration of Chinese people, and Chinese Americans were able to become relatively secure and well-established (if still subject to discrimination and the lingering effect of their

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perceived “unassimilability”). At this time Chinese Americans could more realistically turn to the next phase of individual and community identity construction, which entailed being seen as authentic Chinese American citizens living in, contributing to and receiving from their new home culture (by this time many in subsequent generations of the Chinese diaspora were native Americans). Because Chinese Americans were at last freer to develop a more comprehensive and productive discourse, this phase comprised, loosely, three parts: assimilation, appropriation, and resistance. As we have seen in other facets of this study, these elements did not necessarily occur chronologically, and in some senses they were more interactive than discrete.

The concept of cultural assimilation is largely in disrepute nowadays, seen as a sort of “sell-out” by immigrants who have such aims in their newlands. For Chinese Americans, the most memorable public example of their assimilation aims may have been when they were labeled the “model minority” in the United States beginning in the 1960s. The “model minority” was a wide swathe of Chinese Americans who were seen as hardworking, economically successful and, yes, assimilated into the newland culture. This label has since fallen out of favor (though it has not disappeared: see “Growing group changes Bay Area,” The San Jose Mercury News, 12 December 2004), and is now often viewed as one constituent in a Foucault-ian regime of normalization, a subtle, double-standard aimed at incorporating Chinese people into American society with, at best, the aim of making Chinese citizens and workers more compliant within economic, political and cultural power structures in the United States, or worse, harmfully setting them against “flawed” minority populations such as blacks, Hispanics or others.

I reintroduce this concept to strengthen understanding of not only Chinese American writing of resistance in the 1970s, to be examined below, but also in view of the assimilation of Chinese people in American culture that has taken place, for there is no doubt that a great number of Chinese immigrants wanted nothing more than to be assimilated—“I’ve decided to stay in California,” announces Maxine Hong Kingston’s uncle in China Men, “This is my home. I belong here” (184). Marie-Paule Ha goes so far as to write that Chinese diaspora subjects have deployed “a particular version of ‘Chineseness’…to promote business interest” and have not been averse to “collaborat[ing] with state powers” (see Ha). However Chinese diaspora assimilation in the United States is interpreted, it is clear that many Chinese Americans have not rejected it. Beyond economic success, many Chinese immigrants have aimed to assimilate by way of their desire to achieve American citizenship and social and legal equality in America. This was true in the 19th century and is still true today, with 24,014 Chinese people becoming naturalized U.S. citizens in 2003, a number surpassed only by Mexico, India, the Philippines and Vietnam. Meanwhile, a December 2004 survey of Asians in the San Francisco Bay Area by the San Jose Mercury News/Kaiser Family Foundation found that “most foreign-born Asians say they intend to stay in the United States and they are more likely to consider the United States their true homeland rather than the

country where they were born” (10). Admittedly this is only one group of Asian Americans in the United States (though the San Francisco Bay Area has the largest population of Asian Americans in the country), but it speaks volumes about the assimilation aims of these peoples. 

It is of course true that a good measure of Chinese “assimilation” in America was (is) forced, discriminatory and condescending, for the reasons noted above. In these respects assimilation was Said-esque, with quite a number of Chinese Americans led to “erase all traces of their Chineseness” (see Ha) and “assimilate by adopting the white gaze” (Ma 25). Nevertheless, a review of the literature shows that there was virtually no significant rebellion by Chinese Americans against this manipulation until the 1960s and 70s. Compare this to the black experience, when as far back as the mid-1800s through the early 20th century, activist writers like Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Dubois were prominent, or Jewish literary and cultural production, which was also vigorous in the United States by the late 19th century. Keep this attitude and these aims in mind in order to understand why it was not until the 1960s and 70s that Chinese American writers undertook more aggressive confrontation with hegemonic discourse, bigoted generalizations and harmful stereotypes in the United States, for it is something of a combination of more conservative, assimilationist attitudes (which can introduce currents of cross-cultural understanding in a newland and can in their way “define the local, as distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement” [Clifford 252]) with more militant diaspora voices that have contributed to the overall “consolidat[ion] of the Chinese-American sense of identity” in the late 20th century (Ma 27).

I shall briefly highlight one major work in the Asian American activist literary tradition—AIIIEEEEE! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers, published in 1974. Although the wholesale notion of Asian Americans as Said-esque “others” was largely in abeyance by the 1960s, and these groups had achieved substantial social, economic, cultural and legal gains in the United States, for Frank Chin and the other editors of AIIIEEEEE! a new version of repressive hegemonic discourse was at work, “forcibly exclud[ing] [Asian Americans] from creative participation” (Li 28). In this view, the model minority was anything but innocuous, and was instead an element of “racist love” foisted onto Asian Americans, a stereotype assigned to them by the dominant culture in order to manufacture and manage Asian American passivity and white supremacy (see Li, Imagining 25). Chin et. al aligned themselves with the militant Black Power movement, and in addition to editing the first major anthology of Asian American writers, launched fiery attacks on racism in American culture. Further, they deconstructed what they felt was simply a palliative label—Asian American—writing that “our rejection by both Asia and white America proved we were neither one nor the other. Nor were we half and half or more one than the other” (Chin, et. al qtd. in Li, Imagining 31). Note that this approach risks a sort of stripped-down essentialism—what Li terms a “no-no sensibility,” and which he

14 Clifford might call these groups “immigrants” and not diasporic people. He refers to “assimilationist national ideologies such as those of the United States” that are “designed to integrate immigrants, not people in diasporas,” and that any group that maintains strong allegiance to their homeland cannot be “cured’ by merging into a new national community” (250). I view this as hairsplitting, and continue to view the Chinese diaspora people as transnational with allegiances to both the home and newlands, and thus still developing along a diasporic continuum in most key respects.
dismisses as “hopelessly constrained” (Imagining 38). While this is true in some respects, Chin et. al also recommended for Asian American literary production a more constructive “set of Asian American literary parameters that affirms, first, the nation space of the United States as the symbolic terrain of Asian American writing, and second, the experiences of and on American ground as the subject of the emergent literature” (Li, Imagining 32). This would in turn grant Asian American writers “sensibility and the ability to choose” their subjects and identifying qualities (Chin et. al qtd. in Li, Imagining 32). In these respects, their work was an important rearticulation of Asian American identity in the United States, and the possibilities of literary production within this community. Unfortunately, Chin et. al’s angry tone at times undermined the very progress that many Asian diasporic subjects had made by the 1970s in creating productive and unique (if sometimes mainstream) identities. It also missed an opportunity to capitalize on hybridity and a poetic transnational sensibility. Thus, something of a void remained in the construction of Asian and Chinese American diaspora identity at this time. In this void sounded a new voice: Maxine Hong Kingston.

Maxine Hong Kingston’s China Men

Maxine Hong Kingston looked out over the Chinese American literary landscape in the 1970s and saw an unsatisfying, two-dimensional space. On the one side was a blend of the model minority pabulum and a handful of well-meaning but largely colorless writing about Chinese American life (a “realistic” school extending from earlier in the 20th century up until about the 1970s that made a genuine contribution to cultural understanding, but did not reach much beyond the bounds of day-to-day life and commonly known history), while on the other was the militant writing of the Frank Chin school, which she considered lodged “on the surface of perception” and “on the same trip as the racist...the yin to his yang” (Hong Kingston qtd. in Li, Imagining 45). Hong Kingston’s goals were more ambitious, and if her approach in her first book, The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts (1976) and her next, China Men, seems at times florid in its expansive, imagistic qualities (which were criticized by Chin as cartoonish “Chinkie autobiographies” [qtd. in Li, Imagining 45], or by others who said they “reinforc[ed] the stereotypes about Chinese in the eyes of the non-Chinese reader” [Heike 73]), she nevertheless accomplished something that no Chinese American writer had even attempted in any substantial way before: a full-bodied, mix of memoir, biography, history and oral history, poetry, storytelling and mythology that conveyed the Chinese American transnational experience and redefined Chinese individual and community identity in America, ripping free nagging essentialist conceptions associated with “Chineseness,” “Americanness” and “Chinese Americanness.” If, as Hall writes, we can view identity not as an “established fact” but “as a ‘production’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation” (234, emphasis added), then Hong Kingston indeed staked a notable claim to Chinese diaspora representation, and in the tableau that is China Men she boldly offered a new representation of Chinese American diaspora subjects and their experiences, “not given or inherited but made” (Eperjesi 151).

Hong Kingston accomplished this by viewing slices of Chinese, American, and Chinese American history, culture, myths, legends, life stories and identity through
a lens that shifts at times dizzyingly between these three perspectives. Her colorful brushstrokes and bold crossings vivified opaque areas of Chinese American history and consciousness, creating “a disruption of the ontological stability and certainty of Chinese identity...shift[ing] ‘the focus...from the categories ‘in themselves’ as repositories of cultural [meaning] to the process of cultural classification itself.”\(^{15}\) In this sense, we can see that Hong Kingston shone a bright light toward a transnational future in which Chinese diaspora identity becomes not a single-minded question of describing its “nature” strongly centered on an “original center,” but a multifaceted process of representation and categorization. In *China Men*, Hong Kingston seems to have had her finger on the pulse of all facets, classic and modern, of diaspora experience and the making and re-making of personal and community identity in a newland. For simplicity, I will list a selection of these attributes with discursive examples from *China Men* below:

- **Changing pasts and onrushing futures**: “No stories. No past. No China” (14); “‘Let’s see the Statue of Liberty at night,’ said Woodrow, who vowed that he would make a million bucks by 1935” (61); and after three months at sea during his trans-Pacific voyage her grandfather “smelled in the wind a sweetness like a goddess visiting” (96).
- **Life in the center and on the periphery**: “‘Everyone who leaves must reach the Gold Mountain, and every man must come home to Han Mountain’”\(^{16}\) (44); and “‘Returning’ [to China] is not to say that he [Hong Kingston’s uncle] necessarily had ever been there before” (200).
- **Bilingual linguistic interplay and encoded communications**: “Think Virtue—think is an ideograph combining the radicals for field and heart, and virtue also has the root heart in it; his name looks like two valentines and is not as cerebral as it appears in English”\(^{17}\) (29); and “He let out scolds disguised as coughs.... All Chinese words conveniently a syllable each, he said, ‘Get–that–horse–dust–away–from–me–you–dead–white–demon. Don’t–stare–at–me–with–those–glass–eyes. I–can’t–take–this–life.’” (104).
- **Diaspora identity construction and divided identity**: “Now that he was in a new land, who could tell what normal was?” (110); “[Chinese Americans] realize their Americanness, they say, and ‘You find out what a China Man you are’” (294); “I want to discern what it is that makes people go West and turn into Americans. I want to compare China, a country I made up, with what country is really out there” (87); and “Yet he [her brother] had not ‘returned.’ Of course, the Center was elsewhere” (301).
- **The terrors of the diaspora experience**: “The father’s friends nailed him inside a crate with no conspicuous air holes.... He felt caught” (49); and “they’d already learned to be shamed by a Chinese name” (211).

\(^{15}\) Ang 284. I have combined Ien Ang and Stuart Hall here, both from the same paragraph in Ang. My arrangement of the text does not alter Ang’s or Hall’s intent or meaning.

\(^{16}\) “Gold Mountain” (金山), the common name for the United States during the Chinese diaspora.

\(^{17}\) “Think Virtue,” Hong Kingston’s father’s Chinese name, possibly 思德, which features the Chinese radicals for heart (心), and field (田), which Hong Kingston mentions.
The normalizing processes of forgetting, assimilating, and distancing\textsuperscript{18}: “They dug a wide hole. They threw down their tools and flopped on the ground with their faces over the edge of the hole and their legs like wheel spokes. ‘Hello down there in China!’ they shouted” (117); “I want my home…I want home. Home. Home. Home. Home” (117); and, “On the other hand, they saw each other when they were young and not again for the rest of their lifetimes; what difference does it make if they don’t see each other a little longer?’ … Gapping, gaping spaces. Two old people with a planet between them” (183).

If “in order to ‘represent,’ writers appropriate the world they write about, make it their property, and exercise power over it in ways that reflect their own social and political interests” (Linton 40) than Hong Kingston’s single most compelling achievement in \textit{China Men} may have been her bold appropriation of American history, with the stories of her grandfathers, uncles, father and brother struggling in true pioneering fashion and ultimately reinscribing American history on the blank slate that the “Gold Mountain” represented. When we witness these men as “the founding ancestors” of an America that “they had invented and discovered” (Hong Kingston 118, 43), they seem somehow to not only be claiming a history for their own, but \textit{reclaiming} a history that is their own. Hong Kingston blurs typical roles of discover-follower, native-immigrant, citizen-sojourner, owner-tenant, and readers view a history (or at least one appropriated version of history) that they had either misrecognized or simply never recognized before, and find their eyes opened to a sort of “changing same” along the historical continuum.\textsuperscript{19} Hong Kingston’s Chinese men were not simply bit players in relatively minor roles in American history, and neither were they typical diaspora subjects who alternately allow their homeland allegiance to dominate their intellects and imaginations or reject their own history and culture in order to assimilate into the newland culture. Rather than any such concrete conceptions, Hong Kingston keeps the identities of her ancestors slightly out of focus, “provisional and probable” (Eperjesi 139), with changing names, switched roles, unexpected beliefs and multiple histories. Hong Kingston often refers to “the father” or “the grandfather,” thus creating figures with less-than-concrete filial attachments, and elastic, nearly archetypal identities. Hong Kingston has been criticized for misrepresenting Chinese history and culture with her colorfully retold depictions of Chinese mythology in \textit{China Men}, and her portrayal of Chinese/American history in the book is similarly “sexed up” with dashes of poetic license and recreated events.\textsuperscript{20} But such “borrowing, displacement, transformation, and continual reinscription,” yielding a “polyphonic montage” of cultural history (Gilroy 102, 89) is a powerful discursive tool that diaspora cultures can employ in constructing and reconstructing their developing individual and community identities, and employing this she imposed a sorely needed “imagination

\textsuperscript{18} From Clifford 255.

\textsuperscript{19} I have borrowed “changing same” from Gilroy, although he uses the term to describe black music and the “striving to comprehend the reproduction of cultural traditions not [as] the unproblematic transmission of a fixed essence through time but [as] breaks and interruptions” (101).

\textsuperscript{20} Whether \textit{China Men} is fiction (a novel) or non-fiction (a history, memoir) has been the subject of some debate. I am inclined to categorize the book as an example of what Truman Capote first called the “non-fiction novel.”
coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation” of the Chinese diaspora in the United States (Hall 235).

Hong Kingston recognized that the long-suppressed and/or distorted Chinese discourse in the United States had prevented Chinese Americans from describing their diasporic experiences, relating them to their lives in their homeland, and completing their identity development in their newland. In *China Men* she created a multi-dimensional, custom-made history that gave voices to Chinese Americans—the “permanent aliens” in American culture—and appropriated a new swathe of conceptual space in which they could live and breathe. Working from the past toward the present and back again, across generations, oceans and continents, she filled in missing hollows in Chinese, American and Chinese American experience, seized discourse by the scruff of the neck, made an important contribution to “the nascent development of a transnational diaspora” that would blossom in the 1990s and beyond (Li, Imagining 49). Ultimately her portrayal represented a people(s) and a nation(s) both in terms of what they are (their essential qualities and allegiances), but also of what they had become in a newland. In effect, Hong Kingston re-crafted the Chinese American diaspora experience into an “open and indeterminate signifier” focusing not on overarching ideas of an original center, race, grand historical and mythological traditions, etc., but on the pragmatic “process of cultural classification itself” (Ang, 282, 284).

**Conclusion: The Chinese Diaspora—Different Shores in Today’s World**

The final stage of this identity construction model brings us to the present day, which I shall term *post assimilation*. One of Maxine Hong Kingston’s achievements is how she not only made an important contribution to Chinese American cultural development during the 1970s, but also bridged toward today’s world of “decentered, partially overlapping networks of communication, travel, trade, and kinship” (Clifford 269) where “flexibility, migration, and relocations, instead of being coerced or resisted, have become practices to strive for” (Ong 19). One result of these “changing same” conditions is that Chinese diaspora subjects have become “forerunners of today’s multiply displaced subject, who are always on the move both mentally and physically” (Ong 2).

Travel metaphors are now recognized as useful in understanding the dynamics of diasporic experience, and based on the conceptions and experiences I have examined in this paper, I wish to revisit a metaphor to complement Paul Gilroy’s image of the ship as a chronotope encapsulating the motility, transnationality, and adaptive strategies of diaspora communities. While by no means truly original (Takaki has used it well), the image of the *shore* is particularly apt to illustrate the lives of diasporic subjects, the challenges of their individual and community identity construction, and their relationship to both their homelands and their newlands. I feel that the conception of the shore—as the margin, boundary, periphery, both the last territory seen at the exit from a homeland, and the first seen at the entrance to a newland (I have stretched the metaphor to include landlocked diaspora subjects), signifies not only travel and arrival/relocation themes fundamental to diaspora studies, but reflects the experience of diaspora communities reconstituting themselves on peripheries of both their new and home cultures, at once inside and outside. Here is that important border and transitional zone, the crossing of which
ushers in a new period of identity challenges encountered by diaspora subjects. Diaspora newcomers are conditioned by both the new shore and their home shore, and further, these two shores by definition bound two given cultural centers. Thus, this image is a redrawing of Paul Giles’s description of the overlapping, multi-focal ellipses of understanding created “when different national formations collide or intersect with each other” (5). Professor Leo Ou-fan Lee captures this synthesis perfectly when he says, “By virtue of my self-chosen marginality I can never fully identify myself with any center…. On the peripheries of [the United States and China], I feel compelled to engage actively with a dialogue with both cultures” (qtd. in Ang 291).

In a move that is emerging as one of the key areas of current diaspora studies, the peripheries (shores) that bound the given foci (nations) are becoming, paradoxically, the new centers of cultural and national development (this periphery-replacing-center conception of cultural development is a unique, once-removed example of Safran’s conception that diaspora communities are, from a distance, “committed to restoration and maintenance of their homeland”). This focus on the periphery is also a key to the current and future conditions of Chinese American culture, for the American shore has long been a fertile boundary of the Chinese diaspora, with rich traditions in major Chinese centers in San Francisco, New York and elsewhere. Hong Kingston recognized this shoreline mentality, sowing her imagery and ideas along multiple peripheries, across transient spaces, among imagined communities, always related to multiple centers. And yet, during the composition of *China Men*, the shore was a much less threatening or intimidating border for her than it had been for her ancestors and, “the shores behind and ahead kept me unafraid” (89).

Indeed, the very conception of the center exercising total control over the periphery seems to be breaking down, not least because world conditions in the present day have made diasporas (actual and virtual) so common as to continually strengthen the peripheries and deplete the centers. This may be most true of the Chinese diaspora, which is not only among the largest in history, but which also has a unique position among diasporas with its unusually strong and stable “original center,” the propensity for Chinese diaspora subjects to take on the roles of “merchant strangers,” and the group’s embrace of assimilation. In short, the combination of Chinese transnational networks linked not only through nation, culture, kinship and spiritual relations, but also through “business circuits, and travel trajectories” (Clifford 248), have yielded an evolving, multi-generational Chinese diaspora that is, through its embrace of “values spread through regions of dispersal and settlement” (Ong 12), simultaneously retaining and paring away essential conceptions of race, ethnicity, culture and nationality.

We are in the midst of a newly evolving global tradition of diasporic threads and affiliations resulting from world travel and relocation, those seeking exile or new beginnings in newlands, globalization and new classes of diaspora movement based on economic motivations, and technology and modern communication. Although the United States may have a unique role in this diorama, and has been called by Stuart Hall “the beginning of the diaspora, of diversity, of hybridity and difference” (244), nowadays one need not venture far from home anywhere to encounter these experiences. The combination of these possibilities seems to have yielded an unexpected outcome, and in today’s world we may find that previous conceptions of
the “other” are becoming more limited, and that rather than a given dominant
group defining other groups in this way, we now all have at least a trace of “other-
ness” within our identities by way of our actual and virtual travels and our
encounters with different cultures. In short, I pose the following question: In the
present day, who or what is the “other” when a migrant community arrives,
intending to settle down and hopefully integrate into a new culture? Is it “them,”
the diaspora community, a “dusky horde” of dark-skinned people, or—only slightly
more comfortable—a people who look a lot like we do, but who have vaguely
peculiar practices, and seem somehow untrustworthy? Or is it “us,” those who
purport to have rooted-ness, who are being viewed by the routed diaspora arrivals
as the other-ones? In any case, either group—“us” or “them”—is likely to be
simultaneously experiencing the other side of this burgeoning diasporic human
drama. In today’s world, we may all be others, and if we are, there may really be
no others. I am following Kristeva, and if this idea is valid we may be impelled to
expand her idea that “the foreigner tends to think he is the only one to have...a life
in which acts constitute events because they imply choice, surprises, breaks,
adaptations, or cunning, but neither routine nor rest” (Toccata 269), for we can no
longer rely on a single-minded perception of “the foreigner” who is the only one to
have a life imbued with such contingency. We may all now live in such an eventful
world with “neither routine nor rest,” and in such an atmosphere, instead of defining
our existence and identity in Manichean (essential) dichotomies of us/them,
insider/outsider, native/newcomer, we must examine what it means for humanity if
we are all others, traveling (actually or virtually) to newlands, struggling at once to
integrate ourselves into and differentiate ourselves from new cultures in a crowded
new world of difference. “The foreigner is within me, hence we are all foreigners”
wrote Kristeva (Universality 290), pinpointing the central concern of identity
construction amidst ever-shifting diasporic identity challenges—inside, outside and
all around us—in the 21st century.

I have extended the purview of this essay beyond the scope of the Chinese
American diaspora proper, and these varied ideas can hopefully be applied not only
to the Chinese American experience, but also to the wider diaspora landscape
sketched in this paper. And so another question arises: Can the contours of this
extravagant landscape avert the gaze of diaspora populations from the magnetic,
heartfelt appeal of ethnicity, community, language, nation and an “original center”?In my view, probably not, and I feel it may be unwise to look solely toward a new-
age, border-less world in which essential qualities of identity and personal and
community history are jettisoned or somehow melt away. I do not, in short, endorse
an “end to race”21 or an end to other essential qualities of individual and community
identity, and instead appeals to a Spivak-esque “strategic essentialism,” that is, an
embrace of justly and constructively held personal or collective beliefs, allegiances
and identity, wisely applied within the modern, open-ended diasporic frameworks
and cultures described and examined in this paper. Perhaps this is simply a
restating of known conditions, for diaspora peoples have long confronted the
challenges of carrying overlapping beliefs, allegiances and identity from place to
place, while encountering and interacting with new peoples and cultures, and

21 From Paul Gilroy, Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line. Harvard
ultimately striving to craft cooperative communities simultaneously within and—most importantly—without bigoted or discriminatory conditions.

We are all, in my view, diasporic subjects, others with no doubt a touch of concomitant alienation, gingerly feeling our way in newlands (actual or virtual), but still trusting in and celebrating our beliefs, our unique individual and community identities. While such a ticklish condition is challenging, it need not be a contradiction or insoluble. Our challenge is rather to combine these identities—the new arrival, the isolated other, the merchant stranger, the true believer, the assimilated citizen, the angry activist, the proud native, the disoriented alien—into a many-hued identity that will replace limiting dichotomies and essentialisms, and create a realistic, constructive, balanced diaspora framework within which we may be able to build or recover fruitful, inclusive models for cosmopolitan communities, flexible trans/nationalities, creative coexistence, and combinatory human potential.
Sources Cited


